Teachings on the Prayer of the Heart in the Greek and Syrian Fathers

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Teachings on the Prayer of the Heart in the Greek and Syrian Fathers

The Significance of Body and Community

Jill Gather

gorgias press
2014

Gorgias Press LLC, 954 River Road, Piscataway, NJ, 08854, USA

www.gorgiaspress.com

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ISBN 978-1-4632-0383-2 **ISSN 1935-6870**

Reprinted from the 2010 Gorgias Press edition.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A Cataloging-in-Publication record is available from the Library of Congress.

Printed in the United States of America

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ABBREVIATIONS

PRIMARY SOURCES

Anonymous

LG	Book of Steps (Liber Graduum)

Aphrahat

Dem	Demonstrations

Ephrem the Syrian

Church	Hymns on the Church
Epiphany	Hymns on the Epiphany
Faith	Hymns on Faith
Heresies	Hymns against Heresies
Nativity	Hymns on the Nativity
Paradise	Hymns on Paradise
Virginity	Hymns on Virginity

Martyrius

BP	Book of Perfection II

Isaac of Nineveh

Disc	Discourses (part II)
Hom	Ascetical Homilies

Macarius

EM	Great Letter (Epistola Magna)
Hom	Spiritual Homilies

Origen of Alexandria

CCels	Against Celsus (Contra Celsum)
ComCt	Commentary on the Canticle of Canticles
ComMt	Commentary on Matthew

Fragm1Cor	Fragments on 1 Corinthians
HomCt	Homilies on the Canticle of Canticles
HomLc	Homilies on Luke
HomLev	Homilies on Leviticus
HomNum	Homilies on Numbers
PAch	On First Principles (Peri Archon)
PEuch	On Prayer (Peri Euches)

Evagrius of Pontus

Disc	On Discrimination
EM	Great Letter (Epistola Magna)
Ep	Letters (Epistulae)
Eul	To Eulogios
GC	Gnostic Chapters
Monachos	To the Monks (Ad Monachos)
Prak	Praktikos
Prayer	On Prayer
Schol Prov	Scholia on Proverbs
Thoughts	On Thoughts

Dionysius the Areopagite

CH	Celestial Hierarchy
DN	Divine Names
EH	Ecclesiastical Hierarchy
Ep	Letters (Epistulae)
MT	Mystical Theology

Maximus the Confessor

Amb	Ambigua
CC	Centuries on Love
CT	Centuries on Theology and the Incarnate Dispensation of the Son of God
Ep	Letters (Epistulae)
Myst	Mystagogy (Mystagogia)
VT	Various Texts on Theology, the Divine Economy, and Virtue and Vice

Symeon the New Theologian

Disc	Discourses
Hymns	Hymns of Divine Love

PT	One Hundred and Fifty-Three Practical and Theological Texts

Gregory of Sinai

CD	On Commandments and Doctrines
Watchfulness	Beginning of Watchfulness

Gregory Palamas

Tr	Triads

John Climacus

Ladder	Ladder of Divine Ascent

Hesychius of Sinai

Watchfulness	On Watchfulness and Holiness

Dorotheus of Gaza

Disc	Discourses and Sayings

GENERAL AND SECONDARY SOURCES

ACW	Ancient Christian Writers
CWS	Classics of Western Spirituality
CSCO	Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium
EEC	Encyclopedia of the Early Church
FOTC	Fathers of the Church
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
NPNF	Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers
OCP	Orientalia Christiana Periodica
RAC	Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum
SC	Sources Chrétiennes
SM	Studia Monastica
SP	Studia Patristica
TDNT	Theological Dictionary of the New Testament
TDOT	Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament
VCSS	Variorum Collected Studies Series

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, considerable attention has been given to the fact that an increasing number of Christians have become disenchanted with their churches and with the little interest these appear to show in the spiritual lives of their parishioners.[1] It has also been suggested that this development has led many such Christians to satisfy their longing for inner growth and transformation by turning to New Age religions, alternative spiritualities, and Eastern faith traditions. Buddhism and Hinduism, two Eastern religions renowned for their contemplative outlook, have been particularly attractive to Westerners seeking to nurture their spiritual existence and to attain greater intimacy with God.[2]

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[1] See, for instance, Robin Amis, *A Different Christianity: Early Christian Esotericism and Modern Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. xiii-ix; Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism* (London: New City, 1993), p. 7; Richard Smoley, *Inner Christianity* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2002), pp. 1-2.

[2] Reference to this phenomenon can be found in a multitude of writings. It is at the heart of works, such as L. Angel, *Enlightenment East and West* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994); J. J. Clarke, *Jung and Eastern Thought: A Dialogue with the Orient* (London: Routledge, 1994); idem, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought* (London: Routledge, 1997); E. Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason, and Religion* (London: Routledge, 1992); K. Wilber, J. Engler, and D. P. Brown, eds., *Transformations of Consciousness: Conventional and Contemplative Perspectives and Developments* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1986). The phenomenon is considered within a specifically monastic context in Bruno Barnhart and Joseph Wong, eds., *Purity of Heart and Contemplation: A Monastic Dialogue between Christian and Asian Traditions* (New York: Continuum, 2001); Mayeul de Dreuille, *From East to West: A History of Monasticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1999); Donald W. Mitchell and James A. Wiseman, eds., *The*

While the richness of Eastern religions is beyond dispute, it is interesting and perhaps ironic that many contemporary Christians remain unaware of the spiritual wealth that characterizes their own heritage and deem Christian teaching too dryly rationalistic to facilitate inner growth. This perception is surprising, especially in view of the fact that Christianity has its own set of powerful meditational approaches to peace and wisdom which are comparable to those of Asian faith traditions. The mystical writings of early Christian ascetics, in particular, pay close attention to a person's inner development, and a glance at these writings soon reveals a deep-seated tradition that is rich in practical guidance designed to invite direct contact with God. The present study wishes to explore this early Christian tradition. It seeks to show that Christianity's ancient legacy, if reintroduced in the teaching of today's churches, may breathe new life into the bodies and souls of discontented Christians.

Before we can embark on the exploration of Christianity's mystical heritage, however, a number of matters call for preliminary discussion. The most pressing of these is the explication of the rather elusive term "mysticism." How might this term be defined, and in what way is it being used in the present context? What did early Christians mean when they spoke of "mystical" theology? How did they conceive of the "mystical" life? After giving thought to this set of questions, we will explore some of the reasons for the long-standing neglect of Christianity's ancient legacy.

The attempt to define "mysticism" is a trying one, and some researchers prefer to avoid the term altogether.[3] Bernard McGinn,

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Gethsemani Encounter: A Dialogue on the Spiritual Life by Buddhist and Christian Monastics (New York: Continuum, 1997); Brian J. Pierce, *We Walk the Path Together* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005); Wayne Teasdale, *Catholicism in Dialogue: Conversations Across Traditions* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004).

[3] Denys Turner, "Mysticism," pp. 460-461, in *OCCT*, ed. Adrian Hastings, Alistair Mason, and Hugh Pyper (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 460; James Davila, "Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism: A Collage of Working Definitions," working paper of the early Jewish and Christian mysticism group, Society of Biblical Language con-

the prominent scholar of Western Christian mysticism, declares that the complexity of the term and the controversy revolving around its usage makes any attempt at finding a simple definition utopian.[4] The awareness that mystics of the past would not have thought of themselves as practicing mysticism but rather as engaging in the Christian way of life, plus the observation that the term is an academic invention which was introduced only in the seventeenth century do little to raise hopes of arriving at a satisfactory definition.[5]

This being said, McGinn does provide a working definition of mysticism by suggesting that it denotes the part of Christian "belief and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God."[6] This is a helpful elucidation of the term, especially within an early Christian context, for it reflects the ancient understanding that mysticism is inherently experiential and linked to a process or way of life. If we take this working definition as a starting point and deepen our inquiry by considering the Greek usage of the term, we may be able to gain some insight into its early Christian meaning.

At the heart of the words "mystical," "mystic," and "mysticism" lies the Greek root *mu*, which means "to mutter" or "a muttering sound,"[7] a meaning that suggests something spoken quietly so as to keep it hidden or secret. This reading is confirmed by the

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vention, 2001, http://www.iwu.edu/~religion/ejcm/EJCM_Definition.PDF, p. 3; Alexander Golitzin, "Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism: A Collage of Working Definitions," p. 7.

[4] Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, vol. 1 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), p. xv.

[5] Davila, "Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism: A Collage of Working Definitions," p. 3; McGinn (1999), p. xvi; Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p. 11.

[6] McGinn (1999), p. xvii.

[7] Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 1156.

translation of the closely related word *mustikos* in terms of something "connected with mysteries," "private," and "secret."[8] *Musterion*, in turn, may be rendered as a "secret," "secret rite," "secret theology," or "mystery," meanings that are closely associated with the mystery cults of the Greco-Roman world.[9] The latter word can also be taken to mean God's private counsels or secret thoughts which are hidden from human reason and await their fulfillment or revelation in those for whom they are intended. Paul, who uses *musterion* in 21 places, applies the term to a secret or mystery too profound for human ingenuity. The apostle draws on the word specifically to denote the mystery of God's love for humankind as it is revealed in Christ. It describes a secret or mystery not because it is kept secret (on the contrary, it is proclaimed and made known in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ), but because it hinges on the revelation of something that remains, at heart, hidden and inaccessible.[10] In this biblically founded theology, *musterion* refers to that which is transcendent and which partakes of the ineffability of Deity.

When we talk of the mystical theology of the early church, we are thus concerned with a teaching that describes an experience beyond rational thought. It explores the nature of a wisdom which, unlike human wisdom, is unfathomable.[11] Simultaneously, we are concerned with a teaching that heralds a person's ability to gain access to Divinity (as revealed in Christ) by belonging to the "fellowship of the mystery,"[12] the church. This latter feature, that is, the idea that humans cannot experience the presence of God apart from the church, is important to bear in mind, for, as we will see time after time in this study, Christianity's mystical heritage is in-

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[8] Liddell (1996), p. 1156.

[9] William Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, rev. & ed. Frederick William Danker (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 661-662.

[10] Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow, 1989), p. 28.

[11] Louis Bouyer, *The Christian Mystery: From Pagan Myth to Christian Mysticism* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), p. 7.

[12] It is helpful to note that, in the early church, mystery meant sacrament, especially the sacrament of the Eucharist.

separably linked to its ecclesial doctrine.[13] If we consider a passage from the writings of the sixth century theologian Dionysius the Areopagite, the originator of the term "mystical theology,"[14] we are able to observe the presence of both of these features. Exegeting Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai (Ex 19 & 20), Dionysius comments in the following manner:

> Then, standing apart from the crowds and accompanied by chosen priests, he [Moses] pushes ahead to the summit of the divine ascents . . . and he plunges into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing. Here, renouncing all that the mind may conceive, wrapped entirely in the intangible and the invisible, he belongs completely to him who is beyond everything.[15]

Dionysius' words allow us to see that for him, as for many early Christian theologians, God eludes human comprehension. The encounter with the divine can only be lived but never described and analyzed. As Moses ascends Mount Sinai to encounter God, the patriarch can communicate the ineffable nature of Divinity only by relating what it is not.

As to the second point that is here being raised, i.e. the idea that mystical and ecclesial theology go hand in hand, it is helpful to note Dionysius' mention of "chosen priests" who accompany Moses for part of his journey and to realize that this image, which is suggestive of the hierarch as he approaches the altar with his priests, is but one of various liturgical echoes introduced in *The Mystical Theology.*[16] A bishop himself, Dionysius advanced a life of inner reflection that was rooted in the communal setting of the

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[13] Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), p. 46.

[14] Alexander Golitzin, "Dionysius Areopagita: A Christian Mystic?" Based on a lecture given by invitation of the Lumen Christi Society at the Faculty of Theology, University of Chicago, on February 19th, 1999, p. 10; http://www.marquette.edu/maqom/Lumxida.

[15] Dionysius, *MT* 3, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), p. 137.

[16] Louth (1989), p. 101.

church. To this extent, he viewed Christian existence as inherently relational.

We will have the opportunity to consider Dionysius' doctrine more fully in the chapter devoted to the discussion of his work. At this point, it suffices to note that the theologian viewed the ineffable nature of the encounter with God as a defining feature of the mystical life. A defining feature, too, was the degree to which personal relatedness characterized this existence. While contact with God could introduce seekers to extraordinary inner experiences, the subjective experience of Divinity *per se* was not the goal of the quest.[17] Dionysius insisted on the importance of the church, its liturgy, and its community. The church was the environment where God's love was manifested. Here, divine love was communicated and spread to the world.

The idea that the mystical doctrine of the early church presents a system of transrational, experiential theology that embraces a life of inwardness as well as communal dialogue will be explored throughout this study, and we will have ample opportunity to inquire further into the early Christian understanding of the term "mystical." For now, it is of interest to proceed by giving thought to another matter that calls for preliminary attention. Let us consider why the mystical teaching of the ancient church is so little known to today's religious seekers. If this teaching is as valuable in facilitating greater intimacy with God as is being suggested, what accounts for its long-standing neglect? How much of the teaching has been preserved, and who has been most instrumental in its transmission? What recent attempts have been made to retrieve and circulate Christianity's ancient legacy? Once we have considered these questions, we can turn to the discussion of the teaching itself.

Reasons for the neglect of Christianity's mystical heritage are manifold, but one important factor appears to be the tendency on the part of past and present theologians to focus too much on the apologetic conceptualization of the Christian message and to ne-

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[17] McIntosh (1998), p. 6.

glect its mystical dimension.[18] Ironically, the seeds of this development were planted by the early church itself. Struggling to survive in the pluralistic milieu of the late antique Mediterranean world,[19] the Jesus movement sought to establish the soundness of its teaching by endowing it with a substantial theoretical foundation. This was a pressing matter, for Christians were accused, at best, of adhering to a crude philosophical outlook and, at worst, of engaging in superstitious, subversive practices that called for sporadic imperial persecution. Hard-pressed to refute life-threatening accusations, Christian apologists strove to establish the truth of their belief system by focusing on its logical explication.[20]

Once Christianity rose to prominence and established itself as the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, its adherents continued to emphasize the intellectualization of the Christian message. Doctrinal controversies dictated the life of the early church for centuries, and rarely have theologians articulated doctrines with such intellectual rigor and precision.[21] It is important

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[18] Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1995), pp. 269-270.

[19] For helpful introductory discussions on the diversity of the Hellenistic world see J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines,* 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), pp. 3-28; Justo L. González, *A History of Christian Thought: From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon,* vol. 1, rev. ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1987) pp. 47-60. The general atmosphere of the late antique Mediterranean world and the deep sense of insecurity that prevailed is discussed in E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

[20] Greek Apologists of the second century, such as Justin Martyr, Tatian, and Athenagoras, adopted this approach to state the Christian case to educated pagans. In the third century, the same approach was adopted, among others, by Clement of Alexandria who argued that Christianity had to come to terms with Greek philosophy if it was to be more than a religion for the uneducated; see W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985) pp. 172-184; González (1987), pp. 97-120; Dodds (1965), pp. 102-138; Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, vol. 1 of *The Christian Tradition*, 5 vols (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 27-41.

[21] The idea that the unity of the Roman Empire depended to a large degree on unity of faith and, hence, on the clarification and succinct expo-

to note, however, that in these formative years, the definition and systematization of orthodox doctrine still went hand in hand with the fervent pursuit of contemplative, ascetical practices. Likewise, it is notable that many early Christian theologians who were involved in conciliar debates were keenly aware of the fact that doctrinal theology was inseparably linked to mystical theology. The minute explication of the church's teaching safeguarded the inner, intuitive encounter with God.[22]

In the centuries that followed, interest in abstract discourse steadily increased. Despite the great popularity of the monastic movement during the Middle Ages and the decidedly mystical orientation of many medieval Christians, the church of the Latin West enforced the growing split between doctrinal and mystical teaching by lending its support to the scholastic movement.[23] The idea that the study of theology implied an academic pursuit rather than a way of life gained in importance. At the newly established medieval universities, professors of theology trained students to think of their discipline in abstract terms and to develop, first and foremost, their faculty of logical reasoning. Less emphasis was placed on the endeavor to strengthen students' inner eye, through which they might behold God intuitively.[24] The unified vision of human knowledge had broken down and given way to a distinction between the intellectual and the affective faculties, between head and heart.[25] This trend continued into the Reformation.

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sition of Christian doctrine is addressed in John Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity and Christian Diversity* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1989), pp. 28-38; see also John Anthony McGuckin, *The Book of Mystical Chapters* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2002), p. 5.

[22] Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), pp. 8-11.

[23] Paul Evdokimov, *Ages of the Spiritual Life* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), p. 180; Hadot (1995), p. 270.

[24] For more information on the difference between monastic/mystical theology and scholastic theology see Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, 3rd ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), pp. 198-222.

[25] Sheldrake (1995), p. 202.

While Luther and a number of fellow reformers had been friars and monks and, as such, immersed in the contemplative life, the Reformation did little to heal the rift between Christianity's mystical and doctrinal legacy. Despite Luther's wish to replace medieval scholasticism with early Christian teaching and despite his emphasis on faith rather than reason as the wellspring of Christian life, the reformer's very emphasis on faith and its importance in the attainment of salvation weakened the influence of the mystical tradition. Henceforth, the contemplative life was to be adopted in response to God's free gift of love in Christ rather than as a means of earning divine reconciliation. The pursuit of asceticism ceased to be viewed as a vital instrument of salvation.[26] Faith rather than merit opened the path to God, and all Christians, whether monastics or not, could lead a holy existence.[27]

This feature as well as Luther's proposal to universalize the monastic ideal, a proposition that inevitably led to the decline in establishments providing the setting for a life of interiority, accelerated the gradual disappearance of Christianity's mystical heritage. By the time Europe entered the modern period, this heritage had been largely forgotten and replaced by a tradition that favored a formalistic, conceptual understanding of Christian doctrine.[28] Following the climate of the time, many churches supported the discovery of scientific truths which were less prone to distortion and exploitation.[29]

The rationalistic approach to the Christian message has guided the churches, especially the churches of the Christian West, for

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[26] Luther did not reject monasticism out of hand. Initially, he criticized monastic life with the intention of serving rather than attacking this form of religious existence. It was only later, in 1521, that he condemned the movement. See Dorothea Wendebourg, "Luther on Monasticism," *Lutheran Quarterly* 19.2 (Summer 2005): 133.

[27] Ian Hart, "The Teaching of Luther and Calvin about Ordinary Work: 1 Martin Luther (1483-1546)," *Evangelical Quarterly* 67.1 (1995): 51.

[28] Adrian Hastings, "Reason," pp. 596-597, in *OCCT*, p. 596; Alistair Mason, "Enlightenment," pp. 200-201, in *OCCT,* p. 201.

[29] Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), p. 242.

many centuries. Still today, theological circles may not always be at ease with a teaching that is experiential in approach.[30] At the same time, it is notable that the mystical tradition, while obscured, has not been wholly lost and that increasing effort is being made to retrieve and reintroduce it to the lives of Western seekers.

Christianity's ancient legacy survives primarily as a lived system in the Christian East, and hence, it is here that its preservation and circulation have been largely conducted. If we wish to understand why the churches of the Eastern Orthodox tradition rather than those of the Christian West have served as repositories for mystical teachings, we might list a number of reasons, an important one being the more liturgical and less apologetic orientation of the former churches.[31] It is also helpful to note that Eastern Orthodoxy has been exposed to an unbroken stream of monastic teaching, from late antiquity up to the present, and, thus, has been better equipped than Western churches to preserve the inherent unity of doctrinal and mystical theology.[32] The continuous exposure to early Christian doctrines has allowed churches of the Orthodox tradition

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[30] Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and Theology: Christian Living and the Doctrine of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), p. 3.

[31] The liturgical nature of the Eastern Orthodox tradition is brought to the fore in the following passage: "The normal Orthodox lay worshipper, through familiarity from earliest childhood, is entirely at home in the church, thoroughly conversant with the audible parts of the Holy Liturgy, and takes part with unconscious and unstudied ease in the action of the rite, to an extent only shared in by the hyper-devout and ecclesiastically minded in the West." Austin Oakley, *The Orthodox Liturgy* (London: Mowbray; New York: Morehouse-Gorham, 1958), p. 12, cited in Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1997), pp. 266-267. Wybrew suggests the liturgical nature of the Eastern churches by comparing the Western Eucharist with the Orthodox Liturgy and distinguishing between the simplicity, formality, and brevity of the former and the ceremonial, participatory, and lengthy nature of the latter. See Hugh Wybrew, *The Orthodox Liturgy: The Development of the Eucharistic Liturgy in the Byzantine Rite* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996), pp. 1-11.

[32] Lossky (1998), p. 14; Sheldrake (1998), p. 38.

to prevent the progressive rationalization of their teaching and to adhere closely to the ancient dictum of expressing faith in prayer.[33]

In the Christian East, mystical teachings have been preserved primarily in Orthodox monasteries, where they have been studied and applied on a daily basis.[34] Since these teachings are of a very experiential nature, speaking as they do of the direct encounter with God, their practical application and transmission by example from master to disciple have been crucial. Of special importance to the process of transmission have been the monastic communities of Mount Athos, which have served as strongholds of Orthodox doctrine since the tenth century.[35] The Athonite communities were instrumental in the revival of mystical thought by compiling the *Philokalia*, a large collection of Christian ascetical texts dating from the fourth to the fifteenth century, during the second half of the eighteenth century.[36] The *Philokalia* was translated into Russian by Paisius Velichkovsky (1722-1794),[37] the founder of modern Eastern Orthodox staretsdom, who exerted great influence on the hermitages of Moldavia and Optina. Optina Monastery was the focus of a powerful renewal movement that spread through Russia in the nineteenth century.

The *Philokalia,* which features prominently in this study, has been deeply influential in the Eastern Orthodox world and, since

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[33] Ware (1997b), pp. 204-205.

[34] McGuckin (2002), pp. 6-7.

[35] Ware (1997b), pp. 38-39; Lossky (1998), p. 19. In his quest for "certain places where ancient truths still dwell" and for "connections with surviving students of those who have sought the same knowledge," Amis visited the monastery of St. Andrew on Mount Athos and describes it as an important source of early Christian mystical teaching; Amis (1995), p. 2.

[36] Kallistos Ware, "The Hesychast Renaissance," pp. 255-258 in *The Study of Spirituality,* ed. C. Jones, G. Wainwright, and E. Yarnold (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 256-257; idem (1997b), p. 100. The *Philokalia* was edited by Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and Makarios of Corinth and published in Venice in 1782.

[37] For information on this important modern spiritual master, see John Anthony McGuckin, "The Life and Mission of St. Paisius Velichkovsky: 1722-1794," in *Almanahul Credinta* (Chicago, IL: The Romanian Orthodox Archdiocese in the Americas, 2008), pp. 115-122.

its translation into English from the 1970s onward, has served to familiarize Western Christians with the ancient practices of their tradition. Likewise of great value to the revitalization of Christianity's mystical legacy are the many works that have been made available in series, such as the Classics of Western Spirituality Series issued by Paulist Press, the Lives of Saints Series by Chrysostom Press, the Mount Athos Series by Alexander Press, and the Optina Elders Series by St. Herman of Alaska Press. Special mention may also be made of the valuable translations of Syriac ascetical texts provided by contemporary scholars, such as Sebastian Brock and David Miller.

Despite the fact, then, that many original writings have been lost, survive only in fragments, or have been distorted,[38] we are nevertheless in possession of a sizable body of work that features timeless insights into the soul's movement toward God. Given the increasing availability of these ancient texts and, thus, our ability to gain a deeper understanding of Christianity's neglected heritage, we can hope to repristinate an experiential theology for the present age. By examining a select number of pertinent early Christian teachings on divine-human communion, the current study hopes to contribute to this endeavor in some small measure.

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[38] Origen's monumental body of work, for instance, was grievously ruined by the imperial and synodical hostility shown to his legacy from the fourth through the sixth centuries. A similar misfortune has diminished the existent writings of his disciple, Evagrius of Pontus. Unfortunate, too, is the fact that hardly any Syriac writings from earlier than the fourth century have survived, writings that, more than any other Syriac literature, bear witness to the Semitic heritage of this strand of early Christian thought. In view of the frequent oral transmission of Christianity's ancient teaching and the elusive nature of the experience it seeks to describe, the preservation of this material has, no doubt, been problematic from the outset. See John Anthony McGuckin, ed., *The Westminster Handbook to Origen* (Louisville, KE: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 25; idem, *Westminster Handbook of Patristic Theology* (Louisville, KE: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 133; Sebastian Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1987), p. xv.

We have now considered the questions of why Christian mystical teaching was obscured, how it was preserved, and what attempts have been made of late to reintroduce it to the main body of Christian doctrine. At this point, it is of interest to provide a broad outline of the content of this teaching and to establish some familiarity with the material at hand. A more detailed inquiry into the mystical thought of prominent church fathers along with an examination of relevant primary sources will be conducted in the main body of the study. In the hope of conducting the exploration of Christianity's mystical heritage in as informed and lucid a manner as possible, one particular doctrine has been chosen as the focal point of inquiry, the doctrine of the prayer of the heart. The doctrine of the prayer of the heart is central to Christian mystical thought, and its elucidation promises to shed much light on the nature of this valuable heritage.[39]

THE DOCTRINE OF THE PRAYER OF THE HEART

The doctrine of the prayer of the heart exemplifies the dynamic transformation of human beings through their personal encounter with God. It has its beginning among the desert communities and ascetical teachers of ancient Egypt, Palestine, and Syria and takes as its starting-point the biblical notion of the heart as the very center of a person. The heart is the deep place in human beings where all life originates; it serves as the seat of every intellectual, emotional, voluntative, moral, and spiritual activity. In the heart, the image of

[39] Helpful introductions to the prayer of the heart are provided in the following works: George Maloney, *Prayer of the Heart* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1981); John Anthony McGuckin, *Standing in God's Holy Fire: The Byzantine Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001); idem, "The Prayer of the Heart in Patristic & Early Byzantine Tradition," pp. 69-108, in *Prayer and Spirituality in the Early Church*, vol. 2, ed. P. Allen, W. Mayer, and L. Cross (Queensland: Australian Catholic University, 1999); Kallistos Ware, "The Eastern Fathers" and "The Eastern Tradition," in Jones, Wainwright, and Yarnold (1986), pp. 159-160, 175-183; idem, "Ways of Prayer and Contemplation (Eastern)," in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the 12thC,* ed. B. McGinn, J. Meyendorff, and J. Leclercq (New York: Crossroad, 1997), pp. 395-414.

God was implanted at the beginning of time, and it is by purifying this image that direct contact with God can be reestablished. While human beings are prone to error and have grievously neglected to preserve the initial purity of the inner image, it can be cleansed and restored to its former splendor if seekers submit to a gradual process of purification, illumination, and perfection. By leading a Christian life of prayer and ascesis, by gaining in virtue, understanding, and spiritual discernment, humans can come to apprehend the presence of Divinity in the heart and find inner peace.

The idea that spiritual progress is not brought about through intellectual effort and theological speculation but rather through the persistent daily engagement in extended prayer, ascetical practices, active service, and the liturgical life of the church is an important aspect of the prayer of the heart. Detailed guidelines on how to persevere in this stringent way of life and on how to overcome the many obstacles placed by God's foes in the path of mystical pilgrims can be found, for instance, in the *Philokalia*, the above mentioned compilation of early Christian ascetical texts. At this point, let us consider some of the teachings that are presented in the compilation. Since the present study seeks to explore, among other things, the intrinsic value with which ascetics of the ancient church endowed embodied existence, it is of special interest to get a first sense of how they conveyed this viewpoint in their writings.

Early Christian teachers of the mystical life commonly divided the quest for God into three stages, the stages of *praktike*, *physike*, and *theologike*.[40] The stage of *praktike* introduced Christians to the life of prayer and ascesis. It gave them the opportunity to begin the process of exploring and cleansing the terrain of the heart and of gradually deepening their quest. Spiritual elders sought to guide

[40] The triadic division of the mystical journey presented in the upcoming paragraphs is most in line with the teaching of Evagrius of Pontus. While it is helpful to organize the journey into three consecutive stages, it is worth bearing in mind that these stages are not as distinct as they are made out to be. Although successive, they are interdependent and overlap. Helpful expositions of Evagrius' triadic schema can be found in Louth (1981), pp. 102-113; McGuckin (2001), pp. 41-54; Ware (1997c), pp. 397-399.

novices toward inner silence and concentrated prayer by showing them how to control the many distractions of their restless minds.

The form of prayer most commonly practiced was monologistic prayer. While performing their daily manual labors, seekers memorized by heart, recited, and reflected upon a short, poignant phrase throughout the day. Most often, this phrase was a quote from Scripture, particularly a quote taken from the Psalms, or a brief spiritual teaching.[41] Its continuous recitation was an important means of preserving the memory of God and of becoming aware of a deep inner sense of *penthos*, a feeling of compunction and grief for past sins.[42] By remembering God at all times and focusing their entire attention on the movement of the repenting heart, practitioners of monologistic prayer were temporarily able to suspend the clamor of demonic voices and to enter into silence, or *hesychia*. Initially, these moments of interior silence were fleeting. With experience, however, they grew longer and allowed monastics to become aware of God's inner presence.

For early Christian ascetics, the suspension of demonic voices was a pressing matter. They knew from painful experience that God's adversaries were ever concerned with preventing deep absorption in Divinity by incensing the human mind with distracting thoughts. Once these thoughts, or *logismoi,* had been instilled in the mind, they manifested themselves at the somatic level, where they gave rise to passionate impulses and thwarted behaviors. The only means of controlling these stirrings was to keep the body continuously preoccupied through ascetical practices, such as extended fasts, manual labor, physical prostrations, and long nighttime vigils.[43] If these practices were performed with care and diligence, they were strikingly effective and allowed novices to gain control over their bodies. Demonic maneuvers could be checked, and practitioners of monologistic prayer were able to observe more closely the

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[41] McGuckin (2002), p. 7.

[42] Irénée Hausherr, *The Name of Jesus* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1978), pp. 82-105, pp. 158-165. For a detailed discussion of the concept of penthos, see idem, *Penthos: The Doctrine of Compunction in the Christian East* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1982).

[43] McGuckin (2001), p. 46.

complexity of their thought processes and behavioral patterns. Gradually, novices came to better understand themselves and to lead a less erratic, distorted existence. They were able to experience the onset of inner stillness, which, if steadily deepened, revealed the presence of Divinity in the heart.

After acquiring sufficient tools to control the manifold stirrings of the body in the initial stage of the quest, religious seekers moved beyond physical ascesis in the second phase of their journey, the stage of *physike,* and engaged in noetic ascesis. They continued to still the mind while receiving instruction on how to sharpen their capacity for intellective comprehension and for the discernment of God in the created order. Initially, aspirants were taught to acquire these new skills by contemplating the nature of the material universe. Later, they were encouraged to discern the all-pervasive presence of the divine by contemplating the nature of the spiritual universe.[44] In this manner, individuals became increasingly adept at seeing God in all things and all things in God. They began to perceive spiritual truths intuitively.[45]

By the last stage of the mystical path, the stage of *theologike*, practitioners were able to perceive God in a direct, personal way within themselves. Capable of controlling bodily impulses and inner thought processes and well-trained in the discernment of spiritual realities, ascetics rose above concepts, words, and images and entered the realm of divine incomprehensibility. Here, they encountered God beyond understanding and discerned the presence of Divinity intuitively, through "gazing" or "touching."[46] This mystical intuition of God was deeply transformative. It emanated from the heart, where the wholly Other drew uniquely close in a union of love. Without forfeiting their personal identity, seekers were assumed into the life of Deity and partook of its nature.[47] More about the nature of the deifying union with God will be presented in due course.

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[44] Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), pp. 107-108.

[45] Ware (1997c), p. 398.

[46] Ware (1997c), p. 399.

[47] Ware (1997c), p. 411.

Early Christians viewed the idea of perceiving God intuitively at the deepest level of their being, in the heart, as the hallmark of inner prayer. The heart was the place of encounter between Divinity and the individual and, hence, the focal point of human awareness. However, because of its unique position as God's dwelling-place, the heart was also the focal point of demonic attention. As indicated above, demons never wavered in their attempt to beleaguer this inner region, hoping thereby to prevent divine-human communion.

Fully aware of the intricacies and dangers of demonic scheming, monastics of the early church emphasized the importance of guarding the heart at all times and of preventing its infiltration by impure thoughts. The eighth century Sinai Abbot Hesychius, for instance, admonished his disciples to "'Be attentive to yourself, lest there arise in your heart a secret thing which is an iniquity' (Deut. 15:9. LXX). Here the phrase 'a secret thing' refers to the first appearance of an evil thought. This the Fathers call a provocation introduced into the heart by the devil."[48] For Hesychius, as for many early Christians, the encounter with God could take place only if the heart was closely guarded and demonic attempts to jeopardize a person's spiritual progress were thwarted from the very outset. This was the only means by which practitioners could immerse themselves in deep silence and communicate with Divinity.

While members of the ancient church were well aware that the infiltration of the heart by impure, distracting thoughts had dire consequences and gave rise to uncontrollable desires which manifested themselves on a physical level, they did not consider the body *per se* an evil thing or a punishment.[49] Misconduct was not a reflection on the fallenness of the body but rather a sign that the mind had not yet gained sufficient self-control to win the struggle

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[48] Hesychius of Sinai, *Watchfulness* 2, in *Philokalia*, vol. 1, compiled by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain & St. Makarios of Corinth, trans. & ed. G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 162.

[49] McGuckin (2001), pp. 39-40.

with impassioned thoughts. The body, early Christians proposed, was integral to the mystical quest and served as a valuable means by which the soul could rise back into the presence of God. The body was a divine temple and, as such, uniquely equipped to provide direct access to the heavenly sphere. Its faculties of perception and intuitive wisdom revealed the inner presence of Deity where intellectual aspiration failed. If the body, despite its merits, nevertheless fell prey to disordered passions, these could be checked through physical asceticism. Physical asceticism was practiced to discipline thwarted impulses. It was not practiced with the intention of controlling and disciplining the body itself.

The idea that early Christians did not condemn the body may strike some readers as surprising, especially when calling to mind Christianity's Platonic and Hellenistic-dualistic background. What may strike some readers as equally surprising is the fundamental tenet of the early church that it is not only possible for human beings to become aware of God's presence in the materially rooted consciousness but that the body itself is the locus of divine self-revelation. Let us now consider an important early Christian doctrine that exemplifies this tenet and that shaped the tradition of the prayer of the heart to a decisive degree, the doctrine of deification.[50]

The doctrine of deification, *theopoiesis*, or *theosis*, bears witness to the strong incarnational spirit of early Christian mystical thought by presenting a compelling vision of human wholeness and suggesting that people's quest for God culminates in their ability to "partake in the divine nature" and to "become god."[51] This is an

[50] For a discussion of the concept of deification, see Clément (1993), pp. 263-269; Lossky (1998), pp. 67-68, 133-136, 180-182; McGuckin (2004b), pp. 98-99.

[51] Michael J. Christensen and Jeffrey A. Witting, "Introduction," pp. 11-15, in *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Tradition*, ed. Michael J. Christensen and Jeffrey A. Witting (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007), p. 15 nn. 1, 2. As the editors point out, the former phrase can be found in 2 Peter 1:4. The coining of the latter expression derives from Athanasius' *On the Incarnation* 54.

astounding proposition, especially for Christians familiar with the notions of original sin, creaturely finitude, and redemptive grace, which characterize the theology of Augustine and that of the post-Augustinian Christian West to a decisive degree. Such Christians may take for granted the unbridgeable gulf between God and humanity, between divine perfection and creaturely imperfection, and wonder how it is possible for a person to "become god" without negating the essential divine-human distinction.[52]

Theologians of the early church addressed this matter by suggesting that a person's ability to partake of God's nature is the result of a process over the course of which the individual gradually conforms to Deity and assumes its qualities without, however, becoming like God in essence.[53] Humans become gods by adoption and in response to the bestowal of the grace of union; they do not become gods in their essential nature. This understanding is exemplified by the teaching of Gregory of Nyssa and his notion of *epektasis*, which refers to the essential energy of human life as an infinite expansion of the soul towards the absolutely transcendent God. On the one hand, Gregory proposes that the soul can experience real participation in Divinity, which is effected through the process of infinite becoming and the infinity of the source to which the soul seeks to be reunited.[54] The created, finite soul becomes divine to the extent to which it resembles God in its ability to experience the unbounded expansion into the latter's presence. On the other hand, Gregory insists on the lasting ontological divide between God and the soul. Since Divinity is wholly transcendent, the soul can never gain full knowledge of the former. Therefore, it continually reaches out to God without being able to satisfy its deep yearn-

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[52] James S. Cutsinger, ed., *Not of This World: A Treasury of Christian Mysticism* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2003), p. xvii; Michael J. Christensen, "The Problem, Promise, and Process of *Theosis*," pp. 23-28, in Christensen and Witting (2007), p. 28.

[53] Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 2.

[54] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: Essays on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1995), p. 38.

ing for divine comprehension.[55] As the soul strives for final perfection and union with God, God continues to elude it. The soul's ascent is without limit, for it can always be transformed into something better still.[56]

Despite the understanding that the process of deification does not entail the negation of ontological diversity, Gregory of Nyssa and fellow early Christian theologians suggested that *theosis* nevertheless allows for the real reconstitution of human nature and for lasting change. By conforming progressively to God and coming to share in divine properties, individuals are freed of the many distortions and corruptions they bring upon themselves by misusing their God-given capacities.[57] They are able to return to an earlier, pristine state and to experience their original glory. Because early Christians believed that deification never implies the transcendence of human nature but rather the fulfillment of what it means to be truly human, participation in divine life also implies a return to full humanity. Humanity is never an obstacle to intimacy with Divinity. On the contrary, we can commune with God only if we are fully human.[58]

The proximity of Divinity and humanity and our ability to participate in divine life is nowhere expressed more forcefully than in the doctrine of incarnation, to which ascetics of the early church were deeply committed. As central to the notion of deification (and, hence, to the tradition of the prayer of the heart) as it is to the entire Christian message, the doctrine of the incarnation addresses the decisive moment at which the eternal Logos, by assuming flesh, lifted humankind into the mystery of his personal Divinity.[59] The Word infused a body with life-giving energy and accomplished the union of God and humans "without confusion or change," but also

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[55] Louth (1981), pp. 88-89.

[56] Von Balthasar (1995), p. 38.

[57] Andrew Louth, "The Place of *Theosis* in Orthodox Theology," pp. 32-44, in Christensen and Witting (2007), p. 37.

[58] Louth (2007), p. 39.

[59] John Anthony McGuckin, "The Strategic Adaptation of Deification in the Cappadocians," pp. 95-114, in Christensen and Witting (2007), p. 97.

"without division or separation."[60] This communion of created and uncreated properties, or hypostases, refashioned the boundaries of created life and allowed for the extension of its boundaries beyond earlier limitations.[61] The Logos bestowed its own powers and privileges on humans and, in so doing, introduced them to heavenly life. Body and soul were subsumed by the glory of Divinity.

The idea that the suffusion of human flesh by life-giving energy allows for participation in divine life accords a prominent role to the body in the quest for God. No doubt, it calls into question the often-held belief that early Christian ascetics advocated a Platonic, if not an outright dualistic outlook, and postulated the dichotomy of body and soul.[62] Largely instigated by the legacy of Descartes' positivism,[63] this belief has dominated the thinking of many Western theologians up to the present. All too frequently, it has been their view that members of the ancient church failed to plead the Christian message of the incarnation with sufficient conviction.[64] Given their alleged Platonizing tendencies, early Christians are thought to have relied too readily on a worldview that challenged the primacy of material existence and to have called into question the integrity of created, bodily existence. Even as informed a scholar as von Balthasar has suggested that early Christians, especially of the Greek-speaking world, proceeded unambiguously away from the material to the spiritual and articulated a teaching that sits uneasily with a dogma as fundamental to incarna-

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[60] The precise nature of this union was debated and decreed by the Council of Ephesus in 431 CE, which was essentially a Christological controversy. For an in-depth discussion of the controversy, see John Anthony McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy: Its History, Theology, and Texts* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

[61] McGuckin (2007), p. 97.

[62] Sarah Coakley, "Introduction," pp. 1-13, in *Religion and the Body,* ed. Sarah Coakley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 5, n. 17.

[63] Coakley (1997), p. 4.

[64] Adam G. Cooper, *The Body in St Maximus the Confessor* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 4.

tional Christianity as the resurrection of the body.[65] E. R. Dodds has pointed to the continuous physical self-torture of Christian ascetics, of which "the Desert Fathers provide numerous and repulsive examples."[66] He has suggested that Christians, like adherents of Gnostic movements, were extreme in their contempt for the human, embodied condition.[67]

There can be little doubt that the Platonic tendency to distinguish between a spiritual reality and all that is invisible, incorporeal, and immortal on the one hand and the physical, transient realm on the other hand had a lasting impact on the theology of the ancient church, not least on its mystical doctrine.[68] It is also correct to argue that the doctrines of world-denying dualistic movements influenced early Christian theologians who, inadvertently, were shaped by the very teachings they set out to attack.[69] Hence, we need not look far to encounter texts that display an ambivalent attitude toward human physicality. For instance, a glance at writings presented in the *Philokalia* or in sources, such as Palladius' *Historia Lausiaca*, the *Historia monachorum in Aegypto*, or the *Apophthegmata partum*, provides repeated evidence of the scruples with which their authors regarded the body.[70] Early Christians did, at times, regard

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[65] Hans Urs von Balthasar, "The Fathers, the Scholastics, and Ourselves," *Communio* 24 (1997): 375, cited in Cooper (2005), p. 5.

[66] Dodds (1965), p. 33.

[67] Dodds (1965), p. 35.

[68] For a valuable work discussing the impact of Platonism (or rather Middle Platonism) on the mystical doctrine of the early church, see Louth (1981).

[69] The relationship between the early church and the Gnostic movement is complex indeed. Despite the attempt by ancient theologians, such as Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and Tertullian, to refute the teaching of their Gnostic contemporaries, it exerted a lasting impact on them; see, for instance, John Behr, *The Way to Nicaea: The Formation of Christian Theology*, vol. 1 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), Pheme Perkins, *The Gnostic Dialogue: The Early Church and the Crisis of Gnosticism* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980).

[70] Cuthbert Butler, ed., *Palladius: Historia Lausiaca*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1898, 1904); trans. Robert T. Meyer, *Palladius: The Lausiac History* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991); A. – J. Festugière, ed., *Historia monachorum in Aegypto* (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes,

the body as the cause of temptation. As such, it could pose a real threat to the mystical life.[71]

However, this study wishes to suggest that these tendencies are but part of a larger, more complex picture. It posits that the passage from the earthly to the heavenly and from temporal to eternal existence which was championed by early Christian theologians does not presuppose the negation of embodiment and the severing of ties with material existence but rather the transformation of the body from its fallen state to one that anticipates the heavenly state.[72] It will be suggested that the objective of ascetical practitioners was to transform rather than to transcend the body.[73] Early Christians believed that attention to physical discipline could improve the self.[74] Body and soul were viewed as intimately connected, and as the site on which the struggle for salvation was played out, the former performed an important role in the latter's strivings for perfection. If expressions of physical desire were harnessed and the body reintroduced to its natural state, it served as a finely tuned instrument, facilitating the ongoing illumination of the soul.

The notion that members of the early church valued humanity's incarnate existence to a greater degree than is often acknowledged and declared their world-affirming outlook by drawing on central Christian doctrines, such as the incarnation, the resurrection, and the deification of human nature (including the body), is

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1961); trans. Norman Russell, *The Lives of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1981); *Apophthegmata partum,* Alphabetical Series, in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca*, ed. J. P. Migne (Paris: 1857-66), vol. 65, pp. 17-440; trans. Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975).

[71] Kallistos Ware, "'My Helper and my Enemy': The Body in Greek Christianity," pp. 90-110, in Coakley (1997), p. 90.

[72] Rebecca Krawiec, "Asceticism," pp. 764-785, in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 774-775.

[73] Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 379.

[74] Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999) p. 17.

one key argument of this study. A further key issue which has already been introduced and which will be addressed throughout this inquiry is the idea that the incarnational spirit of Christianity's mystical heritage is reflected also in the relational setting of the ascetical life. It is being proposed that the representation of ascetics as solitary hermits suggests too narrow a reading and does not capture the early Christian sentiment, according to which the outer life nurtures rather than throttles the inner life.[75]

The present study seeks to establish, then, that the quest for God was less isolated than it may appear to have been. While the ascetical life did imply physical withdrawal from the world, few seekers severed all relations with their surroundings. Even ascetics who frequented cells in remote, inaccessible areas remained members of a monastic community. They assembled on a weekly basis for communal prayer and to receive provisions.[76] Simeon Stylites, the most famous of the solitary virtuosos who dominated the Syrian ascetical scene, did not lead an isolated existence. The stylite was surrounded by a community of devotees who catered to his needs and by pilgrims who came from afar, hoping he might bless them, mediate disputes, predict future events, or perform cures.[77]

The degree to which theologians of the ancient church situated the transformative power of asceticism within a communal context will hopefully become increasingly apparent over the course of this study.[78] Spiritual advancement depended on the support which ascetics received from one another.[79] Spiritual advancement depended on the local community also for providing an arena in which mystical pilgrims could prove their commitment to a life of obedience, patience, and humility. The communal setting of ascetical existence was a source of support as well as a testing ground. Without either, the soul could not prosper.

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[75] Adam G. Cooper, *The Body in St Maximus the Confessor* (New York; Oxford: Oxford, 2005), p. 8.

[76] Yizhar Hirschfeld, *The Judean Desert Monasteries in the Byzantine Period* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 18-19.

[77] Clark (1999), pp. 35-36

[78] Elm (1994), p. 380.

[79] Clark (1999), p. 35.

Having outlined key arguments of this study, let us now pause to give thought to pertinent research that has been conducted on the topic at hand. To this end, it is helpful to examine research that considers the Christian mystical tradition in general and the prayer of the heart in particular. As a means of highlighting the incarnational orientation of early Christian teachings, we will pay special attention to scholarship that emphasizes the connection between inner prayer and the holistic biblical concept of the heart. Once we have examined this research, it will be possible to establish in which instances the current study draws on earlier findings and how it seeks to deepen the present understanding of Christianity's mystical heritage.

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Sooner or later, anyone exploring the early Christian mystical tradition and the doctrine of the prayer of the heart in particular will encounter research that distinguishes between two prominent strands of ascetical teaching, the noetic, intellectual strand and the heart-centered, affective strand. The former is associated, first and foremost, with Origen and Evagrius, two important early Christian theologians who embraced Platonic teaching, especially its doctrine of the mind's escape from matter and ascent toward immaterial heights. The latter strand is commonly linked with Syrian Christianity and its strong Semitic heritage, a heritage that focuses on the heart as the place where human beings become aware of God's presence. Byzantine mystical thought is viewed as the harmonizing force of these two currents.

Irénée Hausherr (1891-1978) and Vladimir Lossky (1903-1958) are two important theologians to consider within this context. In 1935, Hausherr, a French Jesuit, published two articles of great influence, "Les grands courants de la spiritualité orientale" and "L'erreur fondamentale et la logique du Messalianisme."[80] The

[80] Irénée Hausherr, "Les grands courants de la spiritualité orientale," *Orientalia christiana periodica* 1 (1935a): 114-138; idem, "L'erreur fondamentale et la logique du Messalianisme," *OCP* 1 (1935b): 328-360.

first article offers a taxonomy of Eastern Christian spirituality by presenting six currents, or schools, of spirituality. Among these, Hausherr numbers the "spiritualité intellectualiste," which is rooted in the teachings of the Alexandrians Clement and Origen as well as the later Evagrius, and the "école du sentiment ou de surnaturel conscient," which the author associates primarily with the anonymous author of the Macarian corpus. The former strand, Hausherr suggests, has a pronounced philosophical underpinning and looks to the intellect as the faculty that defines human nature at its most fundamental level. Adherents of this school of thought consider the contemplation of divine light as the essentially Platonic goal of the mystical life.[81] Unlike representatives of the intellective approach, members of the "school of sentiment" insist on the sensible perception of grace. The discernment of the Holy Spirit is a visceral, tangible experience. Little emphasis is placed on the intellect or the will as the seat of divine apprehension.[82]

While Hausherr juxtaposes these two strands, he does not insist on a fixed classification and, in his later article, presents a more subtle analysis of the intellective-affective categorization.[83] In this article, he distinguishes within the affective strand itself and points to Macarius as an intermediary figure between the intellective approach of Evagrius and the overtly affective, physical Messalian approach. Despite this more nuanced reading, Hausherr does, however, maintain his basic distinction between the two schools of thought and, by doing so, introduces a way of compartmentalizing Christianity's mystical heritage that has been of lasting influence.

A very similar approach is adopted by Lossky in his classic study *The Mystical Tradition of the Eastern Church*, published in 1944. In this study, the renowned Orthodox theologian explores Origen's legacy and suggests that the Alexandrian thinker, by virtue of his pronounced noetic orientation, is not truly representative of the Eastern Christian tradition. Distinguishing between Christian mys-

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[81] Hausherr (1935a): 122-123.

[82] Hausherr (1935a): 127.

[83] For a discussion of this feature, see Marcus Plested, *The Macarian Legacy: The Place of Macarius-Symeon in the Eastern Christian Tradition* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 59.

ticism and the mystical philosophy of the Neoplatonist, between the God of revelation and the God of philosophers, Lossky assigns Origen to the latter categories and argues that "with Origen, Hellenism attempts to creep into the Church. . . . It is for this reason that the Church has had to fight against 'Origenism' as she has always fought against doctrines which, in striking at the divine incomprehensibility, replaced the experience of the unfathomable depths of God by philosophical concepts."[84]

For Lossky, the hallmark of Christianity is not the speculation of abstract principles. Christianity is not a "theology of concepts" or a religious philosophy, a stance he believes Origen and his followers to have adopted. The hallmark of Christianity lies in the deep contemplation of Divinity beyond understanding where the mysterious, incomprehensible God of revelation is known experientially in a deifying union.[85] Lossky points to Macarius, a chief representative of the Syrian tradition, as a prime example of this approach.[86] Unlike Origen and Evagrius, who are wont to focus on the radiant vision of God in the *nous* and the mind's knowledge of its own divinity which procures beatitude, Macarius points to the importance of contemplating God in the pure atmosphere of the heart.[87] Lossky suggests that Macarius and ancient teachers of similar sentiment who sought to know God viscerally rather than intellectually are the true representatives of the Eastern Christian tradition.

Lossky's objective is not to engage in a detailed analysis of Macarius or of Syrian Christianity, and his discussion of this tradition is cursory. Nor does he propose the juxtaposition of the Macarian corpus to the legacy of Origen. Nevertheless, his discussion introduces a close association of Syrian theology with a heartfelt, intuitive understanding of God on the one hand and of the Origenian tradition with intellectual striving on the other hand. In doing so, Lossky's work suggests the incompatibility of these teach-

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[84] Lossky (1998), pp. 32-33.

[85] Lossky (1998), pp. 34-43.

[86] Lossky (1998), p. 68.

[87] Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), p. 38.

ings and encourages their categorization into two distinct schools of thought. Like the schema of Hausherr, this classification was embraced by subsequent researchers and has come to define the discourse on early Christian mystical thought to a large degree.

George Maloney (1924-2005), the prominent scholar of Eastern Christianity and prolific spiritual writer, is one researcher who adopted this particular approach. In his monograph on the prayer of the heart, in which he examines the history of this ancient tradition, its salient features, and the deifying state it seeks to induce, he distinguishes between an early Christian heart spirituality and an early Christian intellectual spirituality. Like Hausherr and Lossky, Maloney views the Macarian corpus as an important representative of the former tradition while pointing to the writings of Clement, Origen, and Evagrius, the so-called Christian Platonists, as chief witnesses to the latter school of thought.[88] The former writings reflect a Semitic influence and speak of the existential encounter with God in the heart. They advocate the transformation of the total human being—body, soul, and spirit—and call upon Christians to focus on the intuitive comprehension of God in their deepest selves.[89]

For Maloney, this integrative approach to the mystical life is distinct from the position adopted by followers of the noetic tradition. Drawing on Christianity's Hellenic heritage, especially on Platonism and Stoicism, adherents of this mystical school "developed the spiritual life as a form of Christian Gnosticism."[90] Maloney suggests that, for them, the Christian is the gnostic who longs for the soul's return to the immaterial realm and a light-filled final vision of Divinity that transcends all materiality. Despite his emphasis on the abstract, logical approach of this tradition, Maloney does, however, caution readers not to reduce its mystical teaching to mere intellectualism. It presupposes a genuine, spiritual gift and a

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[88] Maloney (1981), pp. 26-29; idem, "Introduction," pp. 1-33, in *Pseudo-Macarius: The Fifty Spiritual Homilies and the Great Letter* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), pp. 1-3.

[89] Maloney (1992), p. 2.

[90] Maloney (1992), p. 2.

way of life that embraces the daily, very practical application of theoretical insights.[91]

In his work *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition,* Andrew Louth adopts a similar stance and distinguishes between the tradition of Evagrius and the legacy of Macarius. The former is intellectualist in orientation and owes much to late classical philosophy and to Origen.[92] The latter tradition, Louth suggests, bears the mark of Syrian teaching and of the Messalian sect in particular.[93] It is deeply experiential and focuses on the soul's visceral perception of God in prayer.[94] While Louth discusses both traditions as distinct schools of thought, presenting them in terms of a spirituality of the heart versus a spirituality of the mind, or *nous,*[95] he notes that such a categorization should not be exaggerated. Evagrius, too, speaks of the heart and the importance of feeling in prayer. We will examine passages in support of this viewpoint in the upcoming discussion of Evagrius' contributions to the prayer of the heart.

In his comprehensive handbook of Eastern Christian spirituality, the Czech Jesuit Thomas Špidlík, a disciple of Hausherr, also distinguishes between various strands of mystical thought.[96] Syrian theologians are aligned with a practical spirituality that owes much to its Judaic roots and that prizes the vivid, internal experience of God. The Macarian corpus is viewed as the quintessential expression of this heart-centered approach.[97] Špidlík contrasts experiential spirituality to intellectualized spirituality and suggests that adherents of the latter legacy are "steeped in the type of Hellenism that long before had heard from Anaxogoras himself that the end of life consists in *theoria*, knowledge, understanding, contemplation—an

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[91] Maloney (1992), p. 3.

[92] Louth (1981), pp. 100-113.

[93] Louth (1981), pp. 113-116. The question of Macarius' relationship to Messalianism continues to be a matter of debate. It will be addressed in the upcoming chapter on Macarius.

[94] Louth (1981), p. 115.

[95] Louth (1981), p. 116.

[96] Thomas Špidlík, *The Spirituality of the Christian East* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1986), pp. 17-22.

[97] Špidlík (1986), pp. 17-21.

axiom preserved by Clement of Alexandria."[98] Practitioners of this mystical approach condemn images and sensory expression. They view the world of matter as a source of distraction. For the eye of the mind to be opened, the bodily eye has to be closed. It is essential that the gnostic's spiritual eye be illuminated by faith and its gaze purified of all attachment to matter.[99]

Like Louth, however, Špidlík is careful not to press this categorization. Very aware of the complexity of early Christian mystical teaching, he prefers to speak of its various expressions in terms of trends rather than distinct schools of thought. While differences between these trends can be pronounced, teachings nevertheless overlap. Even ascetics who embraced the intellectualized approach and sought detachment from matter engaged in natural contemplation to discern the presence of God in the created order. They, too, knew that as "one climbs with great difficulty from one intellectual concept to another . . . one discovers that God is still far away; thereupon one chooses another path, that of 'ignorance' and that of 'love' or 'ecstasy.'"[100]

The joining of various ascetical teachings marks the prayer of the heart tradition to a decisive degree. By the end of the study, the extent to which this fusion characterizes the ancient practice will hopefully have become more apparent. At this point, it is of interest to consider the work of Kallistos Ware and John McGuckin, two scholars who have drawn attention to the fact that the two strands of Christian spirituality, the noetic and the heart-centered strand, are not as distinct as they are made out to be but rather complement each other.[101] Since both researchers base their argument largely on the definition of the terms *nous* and *kardia,* a brief look at these terms and their compatibility will be helpful.

Origen and his followers—Evagrius being one of his most loyal disciples—drew largely on Christianity's Greek intellectual background to describe the higher aspect of the soul, the mind or

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[98] Špidlík (1986), p. 19.
[99] Špidlík (1986), pp. 20-21.
[100] Špidlík (1986), p. 20.
[101] McGuckin (2001), pp. 56-57; Ware (1986), p. 160.

intellect, which they referred to as the *nous*. In its pre-fallen state, the *nous* constituted the entire soul (and not just its higher aspect), and it contemplated God ceaselessly through the Word, the Logos. The *nous* preserved its kinship to the divine realm after the fall and, given this kinship, is the means by which the soul ascends back into the presence of God. Here, the mind reexperiences the blissful existence it knew in its original, unblemished state.

According to Origen, the Logos is the Creator of the *nous* and the source of divine-human kinship.[102] Guided by the Platonic axiom that only like can know like, he suggests that the Logos, the Image of God, created the *nous* in its own image and, by doing so, provided human beings with a means of refashioning themselves after their divine model. Origen proposes that the image of the Logos in the highest part of the human soul is never lost, even if it is covered by many layers of ignorance and sin. Assimilation to the divine model is thus always possible, provided Christians commit to the mystical life and the relentless pursuit of purification, illumination, and perfection. By engaging in this dynamic process, the inner image can gradually be freed of tarnish and retrieve its original likeness to the Logos. Attainment of such likeness coincides with full knowledge of the Son and, through the mediating activity of the Son, with full knowledge of God. By cleansing the divine image, the *nous* is able to come face to face with Divinity and to experience a light-filled union.

Unlike adherents of the noetic current, theologians of the Syrian tradition, of which Macarius is the chief representative, commonly resorted to the term *kardia* to describe the human faculty through which an encounter with God is made possible.[103] Instead of envisioning divine-human communion in terms of a noetic ascent, members of this strand advocated a descent into the human

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[102] The following brief discussion derives largely from Henri Crouzel, *Origen* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989), pp. 87-119.

[103] Helpful introductions to Macarius' mystical doctrine are provided by Maloney (1982), pp. 11-20; Simon Tugwell, "Evagrius and Macarius," in Jones, Wainwright, and Yarnold (1986), pp. 173-175; idem, *Ways of Imperfection: An Exploration of Christian Spirituality* (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1985), pp. 47-58.

heart. Spiritual guides encouraged their disciples to enter into this hidden region and to explore its terrain with persistence and care. Initially, this exploration brought to the surface much that was dark, distorted, and opposed to the ways of God. Yet if ascetics persevered in their quest for perfection and were determined to uproot the prompting of demons in the heart, they could uncover the Kingdom of Heaven that lay hidden within themselves. They could discern God's movement in the heart and enter into lasting relations with Divinity.

With this brief elucidation in mind, the question arises of whether or not the two terms *nous* and *kardia* do indeed speak of two distinct human faculties, as has frequently been suggested. Or are they perhaps compatible, seeking to describe, each in its own way, a person's essential being and seat of spiritual intelligence? Do not both terms point to that part of human nature with which it is possible to transcend the human realm and to touch upon God? Ware and McGuckin suggest as much.

According to Ware, Evagrius used the term *nous* not only to designate "the reasoning brain but also, and more fundamentally, the apprehension of spiritual truth through direct, non-discursive insight."[104] Macarius, he resumes, "understood by the heart not merely the emotions and affections but the deep centre of the human person."[105] If Evagrius is to be termed an intellectualist, it should be recognized that the word is employed in a sense quite different from its current usage. It is equally important to correctly understand the early Christian conception of *kardia* and to realize that it seeks to capture the place where a person is most authentically in the image of God.[106]

McGuckin presents a similar argument. While acknowledging the value of contrasting the two dominant themes of noetic and heart-centered mysticism to explore the roots of the Byzantine spiritual tradition, he suggests that this approach is nevertheless an oversimplification that does not take into consideration exactly

[104] Ware (1986), p. 160.
[105] Ware (1986), p. 160.
[106] Ware (1997c), pp. 400-401.

how much interconnectedness there is between the two expressions of early Christian mystical thought.[107]

In support of his argument, McGuckin looks beyond the noetic teaching of the early church to Greek philosophy and suggests that even ancient thinkers, despite their reliance on the concept of the *nous* to designate a person's truest reality, did not dismiss the notion of the heart out of hand.[108] While Plato never abandoned the basic physiological concept of the heart, he occasionally ascribed to it functions of the soul. The Stoic philosopher Chrysippos and his disciple Diogenes of Babylon pointed to the heart as the central organ of intellectual life, the seat of reason, from which feeling, willing, and thinking proceed, even if they did not go so far as to identify the process of thought with the heart.[109] McGuckin comments further on the compatibility of both terms by considering the Septuagint, the Greek translation of Jewish scriptures, and by noting that its authors frequently used *kardia* interchangeably with the terms *nous*, *psyche*, *dianoia*, and *pneuma.* [110] For these authors, as for early Christian theologians, the heart was synonymous with the intellect, soul, mind, and spirit. The stringent distinction between human faculties was foreign to them, and the deepest layer of a person's existence could be indicated by a variety of names.

McGuckin's argument that Greek philosophy itself does not propose the fixed categorization of the intellective and emotive faculties gains further support if we note that even Plato, the greatest of speculative thinkers, was not a mere theoretician but always strove to acquire a direct, felt sense of the divine Mind. Like later Christian theologians, the Greek philosopher did not distinguish between the sphere of the mind on the one hand and the sphere of direct, visceral experience on the other hand. Rather, he tried to preserve their fundamental unity by leading his daily life in accor-

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[107] McGuckin (2001), pp. 56-57.

[108] McGuckin (1999), pp. 70-71.

[109] J. Behm, "*kardia* Among the Greeks," *TDNT* 3.608-609, cited in McGuckin (1999), p. 70.

[110] J. Behm, "The LXX, and Hellenistic and Rabbinic Judaism," *TDNT* 3.609-610, cited in McGuckin (1999), p. 70.

dance with philosophical precepts.[111] Stoic philosophers followed this example. They, too, acknowledged the inherent connection between intellectual speculation and tangible, inner awareness and honored this tie by conducting their everyday affairs in a philosophical manner.[112]

For the time being, these comments may suffice to suggest the compatibility of the two terms and the futility of relegating them to distinct spheres of existence, the one to the realm of the intellect and the other to the realm of the intuitive, experiential life. Hopefully, it has been sufficiently indicated that Origenian and Syrian ascetics had the same interest at heart, even if they articulated their teaching in a variety of ways and set different priorities. Adherents of both currents of mystical thought hoped to describe the sacred inner region where the divine-human encounter took place. They all wished to indicate how a life of prayer, ascesis, and charity introduced humans to an inner silence that revealed the presence of God. Origen and his followers tended to speak of the illumination of the *nous* and proposed its ascent toward heavenly regions. Syrian theologians were more likely to look to the heart and to call for the exploration of its hidden crevices. Ultimately, however, proponents of both currents sought to indicate how humans might be purified and apprehend God in an immediate, experiential fashion.

The research of Ware and McGuckin features prominently in the above discussion, and it will continue to do so throughout this study. Valuable contributions to a better understanding of the doctrine of inner prayer have also been provided by the above-mentioned scholars, Hausherr, Maloney, and Špidlík, whose legacies are certainly not limited to their discussions of early Christian mystical thought in terms of classifiable schools of thought. Brock and Golitzin are two further researchers whose work calls for close

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[111] Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Greece and Rome*, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1993), pp. 260-261. This teaching is exemplified by Plato's proclamation that the troubles of humankind call for the rule of philosopher-kings, i.e. rulers who are capable of combining political power with philosophical learnedness.

[112] Hadot (1995), pp. 58-59.

attention. All of these authors are intimately acquainted with the ascetical teachings of late antiquity, and their work offers much insight into the prayer of the heart and its distinctly holistic biblical outlook.

Hausherr focused on the conception of prayer as a continual state of being and as a way of life inviting greater intimacy with God.[113] In his classic study on the Jesus Prayer, *The Name of Jesus*, in which he inquires into the early Christian usage of the messianic name, Hausherr pays tribute to the biblical and incarnational context of Christianity's mystical legacy by commenting on the fervor with which ascetics called upon the name of Jesus, thereby hoping to invoke the presence of their Savior and the grace that was bestowed upon them at the incarnation. Their devotion to the name of the Lord, Hausherr suggests, reflects a deep belief in the importance of God's salvific embodiment and its deifying effect on human nature. For early Christians, the heartfelt, continual invocation of the holy name established the closest of relations with Christ, who came to belong to them as they belonged to him.[114] It allowed for union with God and the sanctification of the faithful.

Hausherr does not exclude Origen from his discussion on the incarnational, experiential nature of the Jesus Prayer, one indication that he does not insist on his proposed distinction between the intellective and the affective strands of Christianity's mystical heritage. He suggests that Origen, like theologians whose teaching is rooted in the emotive encounter with God, displays a lasting commitment to the messianic name and infuses his teaching with a deep tenderness for Christ. According to Hausherr, Origen's habit of adding to the different names of Christ the possessive adjective "my" suggests a burning, physical love for God, which Origen feels in his flesh and bones. It also suggests an acute theological sensitivity to a person's ability to perceive the inner presence of Christ experientially.[115]

Hausherr sheds further light on the debt of the doctrine of inner prayer to the incarnational spirit of Christian teaching by ex-

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[113] Hausherr (1978), pp. 119-189.
[114] Hausherr (1978), p. 25.
[115] Hausherr (1978), pp. 21-26.

ploring the motives that propelled members of the ancient church to engage in the mystical life. He is emphatic that ascetics did not flock to the desert to immolate themselves for the glory of God. They did not seek a life of misery. Rather, they longed to attain "a state of total interior integration and wholeness which is literally health or salvation (*soteria*), the well-being and joy that comes from living for the greater honor and glory of one's maker."[116] If early Christians embraced the rigors of this life, they did so in the hope of entering a state of true prayer which "is completely peaceful and restful even for the body."[117] Their objective was not to bring about a state of mental and physical exertion.

Špidlík adopts a very similar approach. Like Hausherr, he points to the inherently experiential nature of the mystical life and the value its practitioners attributed to material existence. Even ascetics who adhered to an intellectualized spirituality did not situate the experience of the divine in the realm of reason alone but realized that the most exalted of thoughts did not allow for direct contact with God.[118] While Špidlík does not call into question the dualistic tendencies inherent in Christian anthropology, he points to the mysteries of creation, of the incarnation, and of the resurrection to indicate the positive stance early Christian theologians adopted toward humanity's embodied existence.[119] As further proof of this sentiment, Špidlík draws on Paul and the latter's belief in the higher dignity of the body. Špidlík singles out the First Letter to the Corinthians (6:14-20) in which the apostle proclaims the body's ability to be raised like the Savior, to become a member of the body of Christ, to be transformed into the temple of the Holy Spirit, and to serve as an important means of glorifying God.[120]

Špidlík deepens his discussion of Christianity's biblical anthropological heritage by elucidating its teaching on the heart. The heart, he proposes, is the seat of total, intuitive understanding. It is the principle of human integration and the faculty by means of

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[116] Hausherr (1978), p. 124.
[117] Hausherr (1978), p. 141.
[118] Špidlík (1986), pp. 19-20.
[119] Špidlík (1986), pp. 108-111.
[120] Špidlík (1986), p. 108.

which the Creator is united to all of creation.[121] The heart's natural desires are noble and representative of a person's longing for the good, the just, and the beautiful.[122] Špidlík's inquiry into the biblical conception of the heart tells us much about the early Christian understanding of the mystical quest. It allows us to see how prominent of a place members of the ancient church attributed to embodied existence.

Maloney largely follows Špidlík's line of argument. He, too, points to the heart as the principle of unity within a person and suggests that "it is in our 'heart' that we meet God in an I-Thou relationship."[123] Here, humans become aware of the divine presence until they can literally feel God.[124] Maloney echoes Hausherr and Špidlík by commenting on the dignity which members of the early church bestowed on the body. He proposes that, for them, "the body is a material 'place' or *locus* where God's transfiguring light is shining through and divinizing the whole person in the process."[125] Maloney further points to the early Christian belief that everything material "can be a 'diaphanous' point of encountering the inner, transforming energies of divine love, bringing all things into Jesus Christ."[126]

Regardless of his tendency to distinguish rather sharply between the two currents of early Christian spirituality, Maloney concedes that even adherents of the noetic mystical strand never settled for mere intellectualism. Origen as well as Evagrius knew that the quest for God was a matter of truly knowing, possessing, and seeing God.[127] Like so many early Christians, they were deeply aware that the intuitive discernment of God's presence was the only means of insuring that the incarnate Logos, the true Life who dwells within believers, divinizes the faithful into living members of

[121] Špidlík (1986), p. 105.
[122] Špidlík (1986), pp. 106-107.
[123] Maloney (1981), p. 24.
[124] Maloney (1981), p. 26.
[125] Maloney (1981), p. 180.
[126] Maloney (1981), p. 180.
[127] Maloney (1992), p. 2.

his own body.[128] Maloney's discussion of this feature is a valuable resource and, like the work of Hausherr and Špidlík, highlights the incarnational sentiment of early Christian mystical thought.

Ware's contributions to the topic at hand are considerable indeed. As one of the translator-editors of the *Philokalia*, he has been instrumental in disseminating valuable early Christian primary sources among the English-speaking Christian West and in refamiliarizing it with its forgotten heritage. Equally valuable have been his numerous publications on a large number of topics concerning this heritage.[129] Like the above authors, Ware discusses the prayer of the heart in light of its biblical anthropological roots. He, too, pays special attention to the early Christian understanding of the heart as our truest self and the point of self-transcendence "where the physical and non-material, the created and the uncreated converge."[130] Through the heart, divine grace permeates the seeker's entire being, transforming not only the soul but all parts of the body.

Ware pays close heed to the early Christian idea that embodied existence is invaluable to the mystical quest and that there can be no salvation for the soul apart from the body. Divinization signifies the transformation of the total person, and Christians fulfill their God-given potential not by saving their souls but rather by becoming spirits enfleshed.[131] As a means of highlighting the holistic, incarnational approach of the prayer of the heart tradition, Ware, too, comments on the power of invoking the name of Jesus, a practice that allows Christians to stand in the immediate presence of the Savior.[132]

Aware that contemporary Christians are "finding it less and less helpful to distinguish sharply between mind and matter, be-

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[128] Maloney (1981), p. 128.

[129] See, for instance, Kallistos Ware, *The Power of the Name* (Fairacres, Oxford: SLG, 1974); idem (1986); idem (1997c); idem, *Inner Kingdom* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), pp. 75-110.

[130] Kallistos Ware, "Preface," pp. xi-xviii, in Maloney (1992), p. xvi.

[131] Ware (1992), p. xiv.

[132] Ware (1974), pp. 10-11; idem (2000), p. 101.

tween soul and body,"[133] Ware is greatly concerned to impress upon readers the present-day applicability of ancient mystical teachings and the benefits they may reap from these. He cautions his audience not to sever the past from the present and to neglect Christianity's valuable heritage. Like body and soul, heart and mind and, indeed, like the affective and the noetic strands of Christian mystical thought, past and present complement one another and constitute an integral whole. We will address the timelessness of ancient mystical thought in upcoming chapters.

While this study is greatly informed by the pioneering work of the above-mentioned scholars, it is most indebted to the research of three particular scholars, Sebastian Brock, Alexander Golitzin, and John McGuckin. Sebastian Brock, the renowned scholar of Syriac studies and translator of numerous ancient Syriac texts, has been instrumental in shedding light on the rich mystical teaching of Oriental Christianity.[134] In his discussion of Syrian ascetics, such as Aphrahat, Ephrem of Nisibis, and Isaac of Nineveh, Brock has paid special attention to their Semitic heritage, to their reliance on holistic biblical anthropology, and to the shared understanding of the heart as the spiritual center of a human being. This detailed discussion is invaluable to the present inquiry, as are Brock's observations on the ways in which Syrian practitioners of inner prayer envisioned the gradual transformation of the heart into God's temple. Also of interest is his emphasis on the close association of the heart, silent prayer, and the interior celebration of the liturgy. A careful examination of this association in the chapters to come will deepen our understanding of how the practice of inner prayer is inherently relational and world-affirming in nature.

Like Brock, Alexander Golitzin has inquired closely into the Semitic roots of early Christian mystical thought, and his writings are a valuable resource in coming to understand the beginnings of

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[133] Ware (1992), p. xiv.

[134] Of particular interest for the purpose of this study are Sebastian Brock, "The Prayer of the Heart in Syriac Tradition," in *Sobornost* 4.2 (1982), pp. 131-142; idem (1987).

the prayer of the heart.[135] Golitzin has published widely on the reconceptualization of the biblical glory motif in early Christian ascetical texts, a topic that is central to the exploration of the present subject matter. Following Brock in focusing first and foremost on early Syrian Christianity (while going on to consider its impact on later Byzantine spirituality), Golitzin suggests that many prominent writers of this tradition reinterpreted biblical ascension and vision motifs, most notably the temple motif, and proposed their interiorization. The human heart was transformed into the new sanctuary in which Christ, the radiant throne of Glory, reveals himself to the human soul. For Golitzin, the Eastern Christian notion of deification, which is so central to the doctrine of the prayer of the heart, is closely associated with the biblical temple and tabernacle tradition. This observation is of great interest and invites further discussion on the process of deification and on the degree to which the body, God's temple, participates in this process.

Equally indispensable to tracing the biblical roots of the prayer of the heart and exploring its holistic approach is the work of John McGuckin.[136] McGuckin has considered these features not only within a Syrian Christian context, but has added to this discussion a close reading of the noetic tradition of Origen and his followers. While McGuckin is ever aware of the influence that Greek philosophy exerted over early Christian thought and over Origenian thought in particular, he nevertheless emphasizes that even highly speculative thinkers, such as Origen and Evagrius, never abandoned Christianity's biblical heritage but remained faithful to its fundamental tradition of the enfleshment of the Logos within history as a paradigm for all human salvation.[137] He suggests that these theologians thereby insured that their mystical doctrine, de-

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[135] See, for instance, Alexander Golitzin, "Et Introibo ad Altare Dei: The Mystagogy of Dionysius Areopagite," in *Analekta Vlatadon* 59 (1994), pp. 334-340; idem, "A Testimony to Christianity as Transfiguration: The Macarian Homilies and Orthodox Spirituality," pp. 129-156, in *Orthodox and Wesleyan Spirituality,* ed. S.T. Kimbrough (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002).

[136] McGuckin (1999); idem (2001); idem (2002).

[137] McGuckin (1999), pp. 73-74.

spite its lingering influence of the concept of the noetic escape from matter, retained a strong sense of embodied Jesus mysticism, a sense they bequeathed to subsequent ascetical teachers.

McGuckin's discussion of this subject matter does not end here. He points to the benefits spiritual elders reaped from the philosophical training of noetic thinkers who presented them with a technical vocabulary on which to base their anthropological and mystical doctrine.[138] For the first time, spiritual guides had at their disposal a system that allowed them to differentiate between the three dimensions of human existence, *soma*, *psyche,* and *nous*, and to elucidate how these respective modes of perception allowed for the discernment of God's presence. Henceforth, ascetics could trace the complex processes by which the heart might be purified and transformed into a divine temple. In this respect, more speculative theologians allowed for the shaping of a mystical doctrine that bore all the marks of holistic biblical anthropology yet was nuanced enough to facilitate the in-depth exploration of a person's interior landscape.

While the upcoming discussion of early Christian theologians and their mystical teaching relies on a greater body of contemporary research than has here been indicated, the writings of Brock, Golitzin, and McGuckin provide the backbone of this study. By building on their research and examining, firstly, the impact of Hebraic teaching on the Syrian and Origenian traditions and, secondly, the debt of the latter tradition to Greek concepts, this study attempts to show that the two currents of mystical thought are inherently compatible. While the two traditions vary in the degree to which they draw on biblical anthropology, both look to this teaching as a means of articulating a doctrine that validates the embodied, communal nature of Christian existence. The Syrian tradition conveys this sentiment by looking to the created order and to

[138] This feature can be observed in many instances, especially in the writings of later Byzantine mystical teachers. For one specific example, see John Anthony McGuckin, "The Shaping of the Soul's Perceptions in the Byzantine Ascetic Elias Ekdikos," in *The Body-Soul Problem in Byzantine Thought*, ed. J. Matula (Olomouc: Palacky University, forthcoming).

God's self-manifestation therein.[139] It focuses on the sacramental life of the church which reflects so powerfully the belief that matter can express the glory of God. Poetry, imagery, symbol, and paradox are its preferred ways of conveying this world-affirming stance.[140]

Yet the writings of noetic theologians are no less poetic and vivid, nor do they fail to display a profound belief in Christ's salvific enfleshment and in the goodness of the created order. Unlike early Syrian writings, they are, however, marked to a greater degree by Greek cosmology and anthropology. Yet as we have seen, far from being a disadvantage and calling into question the incarnational orientation of their mystical doctrine, the Greek learnedness of Origenian theologians brought a new degree of subtlety to the more affective, fluid approach of the Syrian tradition. The refined vocabulary introduced by noetic theologians contributed to the flowering of a practice that was experiential in nature and simultaneously rooted in a sophisticated Christian anthropological system. It allowed ascetics of the early church to articulate a teaching that suggested how body and soul alike might come to know an earlier state of glory.

With the above introductory and historiographical comments in mind, we can now delve into the main body of the study. Let us do so by exploring first the biblical anthropological origins of the prayer of the heart. To do so, the first chapter will provide an inquiry into the doctrine of the heart in the Old and the New Testament. In the following chapter, attention will be paid to the mystical teaching of the early Syrian church, which expresses Christianity's scriptural heritage with particular force. Initially, consideration is given to the works of two prominent fourth century Syrian theologians, Aphrahat and Ephrem. The elucidation of their mystical doctrine will be followed by an examination of the teaching of Macarius, another great Syrian teacher of the ascetical life. While

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[139] Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem the Syrian* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publication, 1985), pp. 27-29.

[140] Brock (1987), p. xi.

Macarius composed in Greek rather than Syriac, his influential homilies continue to reflect a scriptural understanding of the heart and provide valuable insight into the inherently holistic nature of early Christian mystical thought.

Once the Syrian background of the prayer of the heart tradition has been explored, we will consider its Greek Christian legacy in the third chapter. The discussion opens with an examination of Origen's ascetical doctrine. Given its lasting impact on the Christian mystical tradition, the careful exploration of Origenian thought and its debt to biblical teaching promises to shed further light on the Semitic origins of Christianity's lost heritage. Simultaneously, it enables us to see in which instances Origen draws on Greek philosophy to refine anthropological teachings rooted in Scripture. The second prominent theologian to be considered in this chapter is Evagrius. Special emphasis will be placed on Evagrius' ability to apply Origenian doctrine to the practical life and to continue the process of forging a technical vocabulary designed to describe the soul's experiential absorption in God.

With the intention of showing how elements of the two compatible strands of Christianity's mystical legacy were progressively joined by later theologians, the fourth chapter of this study is dedicated to their early Byzantine synthesis. The chapter opens with a discussion of writings by Dionysius the Areopagite, a sixth century Syrian theologian who, despite his background, was intimately acquainted with the noetic tradition of ancient Alexandria. Since the seventh century theologian Maximus the Confessor exemplifies the intermarriage of earlier ascetical teachings, the discussion of his writings will conclude the chapter. To allow for as comprehensive a discussion of the prayer of the heart as possible, the subsequent chapter will provide a brief elucidation of the Egyptian desert tradition and of Byzantine hesychasm. A summarizing overview of the study's salient findings are presented at the outset of the conclusion.

This study opened with the observation that an increasing number of contemporary Christians long for an inner encounter with God yet do not receive sufficient spiritual guidance from their churches to satisfy this longing. The study will close with the suggestion that the doctrine of the prayer of the heart is uniquely suited to meet this need and to ease some of the restlessness experienced by modern seekers. Much speaks in favor of the reintro-

duction of this ancient practice to the teaching of today's churches: its nuanced reading of human consciousness, its body-centered, practical approach to Christian life, and, closely linked to the previous point, its insistence that the quest for God is inherently communal and presupposes relations with neighbors and the world at large. All of these aspects promise to strike a chord with modern individuals who are at home in a world in which the quest for inner healing increasingly focuses on the study of somatic awareness and relational systems. Thus, suggestions will be made as to how the mystical doctrine of the early church might be translated into a present-day context and allow contemporary Christians to benefit from its powerful teaching on inner transformation.

1 THE PRAYER OF THE HEART: ITS BIBLICAL ORIGINS

THE OLD TESTAMENT

Biblical anthropology endows the heart with tremendous importance, and the frequent usage of the noun *lēb/lēbāb* in the Old Testament—the term is employed 853 times in Hebrew and 8 times in Aramaic—attests to this importance.[141] While the present-day understanding of the term may lead a modern audience astray and cause it to assume that *lēb* refers to the physical heart, it is helpful to bear in mind that this is seldom the case in biblical lore. The Old Testament rarely employs the word to designate this central organ, and if reference to human anatomy is occasionally made, *lēb* is likely to denote the chest area in general.[142]

What, then, is the primary biblical usage of the term? Which human part or aspect does it seek to describe? According to Old Testament anthropology, the word *lēb* refers to the fundamental nature of a person and captures the entire spectrum of human existence, the vital, affective, noetic, voluntative, and spiritual.[143] Of

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[141] H. J. Fabry, "*lēb/lēbāb,*" *TDOT* 7.407; F. Baumgärtel, "*kardia* in the OT," *TDNT* 3.606. Wolff suggests that *lēb/lēbāb* is the most important word in the vocabulary of Old Testament anthropology; see Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), p. 40.

[142] Fabry, *TDOT* 7.411. Johnson indicates that the ancient Israelites were not aware of the heart's physiological importance and its vital function of circulating blood; see Aubrey R. Johnson, *The Vitality of the Individual in the Thought of Ancient Israel* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1964), pp. 75-76.

[143] Fabry, *TDOT* 7.412.

these categories, only the concept of the heart as a person's vital center addresses the physical dimension to some degree, a reading that is captured in the verse

> Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life. (Prv 4:23)[144]

Another rare instance in which the heart's physical aspect is taken into consideration and its source as a human being's vital energy is made explicit can be observed in the following verse:

> My heart throbs, my strength fails me; as for the light of my eyes—it also has gone from me. (Ps 38:10)

In this instance, the heart is presented as the place where sickness manifests itself most overtly.[145] Occasionally, a link between the heart and vitality may be suggested, even if the former is viewed primarily as the affective center of humans:

> A tranquil *lēb* gives life to the flesh. (Prv 14:30)

But usually the reader is more likely to find straightforward references to the heart as the seat of emotion.[146] In the *lēb,* all feelings have their origin, from sadness to joy, from worry to hope, from fear to boldness:[147]

> Even in laughter the heart is sad, and the end of joy is grief. (Prv 14:13)

> Anxiety weighs down the human heart, but good word cheers it up. (Prv 12:25)

> At this also my heart trembles, and leaps out of its place. (Job 37:1)

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[144] Unless indicated, quotes are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version.*

[145] Wolff (1974), p. 42.

[146] Fabry, *TDOT* 7.414.

[147] Jan G. Bovenmars, *A Biblical Spirituality of the Heart* (New York: Alba House, 1991), pp. 20-24.

> Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the Lord. (Ps 31:24)

Contemporary readers who are used to associating the heart with human emotions may take this association for granted. However, ancient Israelites did not establish such a connection as a matter of course. For them, the term pointed, first and foremost, to a person's intellectual function.[148] The heart designated the ability to reason and understand. If the *lēb* lacked insight and perception, it failed to fulfill its primary purpose. The close link between the heart and the capacity for noetic apprehension is conveyed in numerous biblical passages, many of which can be found in the wisdom literature. The following selection of citations may serve as a sample:

> My child, if you accept my words and treasure up my commandments within you, making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding . . . then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. (Prv 2:1-2, 5)

> He is wise in heart, and mighty in strength—who has resisted him, and succeeded? (Job 9:4)

> The heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of a fool to the left. (Eccl 10:2)

> An intelligent *lēb* acquires knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge. (Prv 18:15)

All of these passages suggest an interpretation of *lēb* in terms of an individual's noetic center. The heart discerns. People gain insight and wisdom by listening with this inner faculty. The idea that ancient Israelites thought of the heart as destined for understanding in much the same way in which ears are destined for hearing is made explicit in the first and last of the above citations. A heart that is capable of perceptive hearing is attentive and open.[149] It is ever watchful. If the heart listens closely, it is able to hear the

[148] Wolff (1974), p. 46.
[149] Wolff (1974), p. 47.

coming of the Bridegroom (Song 5:2); it becomes a perfect vessel with which to apprehend the words of God (Ez 3:10-11). This aspect bears keeping in mind, for early Christians followed their Jewish ancestors in calling for a heart that is in a constant state of attentiveness. They followed their ancestors also in suggesting that the heart's sense of hearing, like its sense of sight, smell, taste, and touch, demands ongoing training and sharpening. The fine-tuning of all inner senses was viewed as an essential prerequisite for the discernment of God and the progressive deepening of divine-human relations.

Closely linked to the notion of the *lēb* as noetic center is the concept of the heart as the seat of volition. In the heart, the first stirrings of a desire can be perceived. Here, future wishes, intentions, and actions are formulated.[150] The heart provides the inner motivation for all deeds, whether spontaneous or premeditated. It is the governing faculty of human will and behavior:

> Do not desire her beauty in your heart, and do not let her capture you with her eyelashes. (Prv 6:25)
>
> But this is not what he intends, nor does he have this in mind; but it is in his heart to destroy, and to cut off nations not a few. (Is 10:7)
>
> Moses then called Bezalel and Oholiab and every skillful one to whom the Lord had given skill, everyone whose heart was stirred to come to do the work. (Ex 36:2)

Of particular interest for the purpose of this study is the importance biblical anthropology attributes to the *lēb* as the core of a person's spiritual intelligence and as the seat of every religious sentiment. God's will and purpose are the reference points of all human emotions, thoughts, and actions:

> I will make an everlasting covenant with them, never to draw back from doing good to them; and I will put the fear of me in their hearts. (Jer 32:40)

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[150] Fabry, *TDOT* 7.424-5; Johnson (1964), p. 79.

> You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead. (Dt 11:18)
>
> He did evil, for he did not set his heart to seek the Lord. (2 Chr 12:14)

The idea that the deepest and truest reality of a person is rooted in the heart and that this reality is defined by its relationship with God is at the center of biblical anthropology. In the heart, the essential core of human beings, God's presence and influence are most directly felt. Here, Divinity impinges on our existence and reveals itself.[151] It is the place of divine-human contact. Deep as the sea (Ex 15:8; Ps 46:2), this inner dimension provides direct access to God. By seeking the Lord with the heart (Ps 27:8), the faithful feel divine strength and grace pour into their being (Ps 19:14; 1 Sm 2:1-2).

But the heart provides access to the divine only if it is kept in a state of uprightness and purity, a state of being biblical sources commonly refer to as a "pure heart" or a "heart of flesh." What exactly characterizes a "pure heart"? How are we to conceive of a "heart of flesh"? Let us give thought to these questions by considering, first, the notion of the pure heart.

Ancient Israelites employed a variety of terms to suggest purity of heart and most commonly did so by drawing on the words *tāhôr* (clean), *bār* (pure), *yāšār* (straight), and *kibbēs* (cleanse).[152] All of these adjectives describe a heart that is upright, humble, and open; the pure heart is full of integrity and honesty. People with pure hearts are morally as well as cultically clean and therefore permitted

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[151] Fabry, *TDOT* 7.427.

[152] For a more detailed discussion of the precise Hebrew terminology employed to designate the pure heart, see Irene Nowell, "The Concept of Purity of Heart in the Old Testament," pp. 17-29, in *Purity of the Heart in Early Ascetic and Monastic Literature: Essays in Honor of Juana Raasch,* ed. Harriet Luckman and Linda Kulzer (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), p. 19.

to participate in the offering of sacrifices.[153] They may worship and approach the Lord:

> Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?
> And who shall stand in his holy place?
> Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,
> Who do not lift up their souls to what is false,
> And do not swear deceitfully. (Ps 24:3-4)

People with pure hearts may not only approach Divinity but may enter into close relations with the divine realm. To them, God offers comfort, guidance, and the riches of the heavenly sphere. The pure heart is infused with strength and joy, a gift no worldly goods can match:

> Truly God is good to the upright, to those who are pure in heart.
> . . . . . .
> When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart,
> I was stupid and ignorant; I was like a brute beast toward you.
> Nevertheless I am continually with you; you hold my right hand.
> You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me with honor.
> Whom have I in heaven but you?
> And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you.
> My flesh and my heart may fail,
> but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. (Ps 73:1, 21-26)

The Hebraic notion that the heart constitutes the vital link between the heavenly and earthly spheres and that it is the locus of divine-human communion is vividly expressed by the prevalent idea that Yahweh knows the heart of all (1 Kgs 8:39; 2 Chr 6:30; Ps 44:21; 139:23).[154] No feelings, thoughts, wishes, intentions, and plans of action arise in the *lēb* without divine knowledge. God knows the heart's deepest secrets (Ps 33:15) and can incline it in

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[153] Fabry, *TDOT* 7.430.
[154] Fabry, *TDOT* 7.425.

any given direction and to any desired end. God can bow the heart (Ps 107:12), strengthen it (Ps 10:17), turn it toward good (Jer 32:39), or incline it toward evil (Ps 105:25).[155] Divine omnipotence infuses the heart with a new spirit and brings it back to life:

> I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh. (Ez 11:19; 36:26)

The above citation introduces us to the concept of the "heart of flesh" and invites a brief elucidation of this expression. Ancient Israelites applied the concept in much the same way in which they applied the notion of the "pure heart" and used it to designate a person's worthiness, generosity, and fervent desire to act in accordance with the will of God. Individuals with a new heart, a heart of flesh, are free from transgression, corruption, and self-interest. They lead their lives in accordance with the divine Law and are rewarded for their commitment with the gift of life:

> Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live. (Ez 18:31-32)

A heart of flesh is a heart that has been filled with a new spirit, God's own spirit, and that is fully alive. Having ceased to be guided by arrogance and selfishness, it longs to follow the Lord's dictates rather than its own.[156] Like the pure heart, the heart of flesh is full of remorse over past wrongdoings. It has been radically transformed and seeks divine favor by means of fasting, weeping, and mourning (Joel 2:12, 28). We will encounter this biblical teaching repeatedly in the upcoming discussion of early Christian mystical literature. Although members of the ancient church viewed grace as

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[155] Fabry, *TDOT* 7.425.

[156] The classic example of a person with a "heart of stone" is Pharaoh who, out of self-interest, sought to keep the Israelites as slaves and refused to listen to Moses and Aaron (and, ultimately, to God); see Bovenmars (1991), pp. 50-52.

the primary agent of transformation, they insisted that this transformation could not be effected without mourning (*penthos*), compunction (*katanyxis*), and ascetical effort. No prayer was as effective as a prayer offered from a grieving, repenting heart.

The idea that the heart has to be emptied of selfishness and pride before it can receive God's life-giving spirit implies that this inner region is not only the dwelling-place of Deity but also the abode of vice. It indicates that good as well as bad arise from deep within a person. If purity of heart allows for the apprehension of Divinity, the wickedness of the *lēb* destroys relations with God and makes divine-human communion impossible:[157]

> If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. (Ps 66:18)
>
> The beginning of human pride is to desert the Lord, and to turn one's heart away from one's maker. (Sir 10:12 NJB)
>
> Transgressing, and denying the Lord, and turning away from following our God, talking oppression and revolt, conceiving lying words and uttering them from the heart. (Is 59:13)

The notion that God as well as God's foes reside in the heart is one further scriptural teaching that shapes Christian mystical thought to a decisive degree and that will demand attention throughout this study. Like the biblical understanding of the heart as a person's essential core and as the locus of divine revelation, the idea of our deepest self as home to evil is presented in numerous early Christian writings. Ascetics of the ancient church were acutely aware of the many intricate maneuvers through which demons seek to corrupt the heart and alienate it from God. Guided by this awareness, they gave careful thought to the question of how humans might detect demonic scheming, counteract its devastating impact, and prevent the heart's life-threatening estrangement from God. Following Semitic doctrine, Christian ascetics were ever concerned to show by what means a sinful, lifeless heart might become

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[157] Fabry, *TDOT* 7.426; Bovenmars (1991), pp. 40-50.

receptive to divine teachings and how it might be transformed into a place of theophany.

As will hopefully become increasingly apparent over the course of this inquiry, early Christian mystical thought was deeply indebted to the biblical conception of the heart. Ascetical practitioners embraced the notion of the heart as the seat of all human activity. It was the primary instrument of inner coherence and integration. In its original, ordered state, the heart was capable of bringing into accord a person's thoughts, feelings, wishes, and actions and of subordinating these to the will of God. It was the vital link between the body and the soul. By way of the heart, divine grace was believed to pour into every limb of the physical body and to sanctify mind as well as matter.[158] If humans chose to cleanse this inner domain by fasting, weeping, and mourning, they were able to acquire direct access to the heavenly realm.

To conclude this brief discussion of the Hebraic doctrine of the heart, raising one further point is helpful. It is notable that the line separating the concept of the heart from the concept of the mind has always been fluid. In the introduction, it was suggested that Plato, Chrysippos, and Diogenes were wont to draw on both concepts to indicate our deepest reality, even if they gave priority to the notion of the mind. Attention was also drawn to the Septuagint and its interpretation of the word *lēb*. Although the translators of the Hebrew Bible most commonly rendered the term by its true Greek equivalent *kardia*, they also drew on expressions, such as *psyche* (soul), *dianoia* (understanding, intelligence, mind), *frenes* (thinking, understanding), *nous* (mind), or *stithos* (chest, breast).[159]

Many of these renditions appear in early Christian writings and, whenever they do, it is important to note that they do not suggest a discontinuation of the biblical tradition of the heart as a person's essential reality. The notion of the heart as the unifying principle of body and soul, of the material and the immaterial, and of the created and uncreated, is at all times integral to the mystical

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[158] Ware (1992), p. xvi.

[159] Baumgärtel, *TDNT* 3.610; Bauer, "Herz," *RAC* 14.1098.

teaching of early Christianity. Just how pervasive this notion is will be explored in the chapters to come.

In these chapters, we will also have occasion to explore the relevance of ancient holistic teaching to modern Christians—Christians who long to look beyond the heart-mind divide that characterizes much of contemporary theological discourse toward a more integrative system. In the attempt to ascertain how the religious life of modern seekers might be revived by the thought of the early church and infused with a heart-felt sense of God, we do well to turn our attention next to a brief discussion of the heart in the New Testament. Let us examine the degree to which its authors relied on Hebraic teaching to articulate their understanding of the direct encounter with Divinity and how this understanding provided the foundation of a mystical doctrine that heralds a truly holistic approach to the quest for God.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

In the New Testament, the tendency to view the heart as the innermost center of a person and as the seat of all human life is continued and taken to new heights.[160] In this inner region, every emotion, thought, desire, wish, and action has its beginning:

> So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. (Jn 16:22)
>
> He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?" (Lk 24:38)
>
> He has shown strength with his arm; He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. (Lk 1:51)
>
> For God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by agreeing to give their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God will be fulfilled. (Rv 17:17)

Following in the footsteps of Hebrew prophets and patriarchs, the authors of the New Testament suggest that God has

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[160] Behm, *TDNT* 3.611.

immediate access to the heart and can discern its many stirrings. The heart continues to serve as the inner arena where Divinity turns to humankind and reveals its will:[161]

> Then they prayed and said, "Lord, you know everybody's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." (Acts 1:24-25)

Also like their Jewish ancestors, the apostles indicate that God turns to humans and grants divine closeness only if the heart has been adequately cleansed. The Semitic tradition according to which the heart has to be pure and made of flesh before it can apprehend the presence of God remains an integral part of New Testament thought. If the core of a person is empty of evil and receptive to the divine message, it is able to serve as the point of contact between Divinity and humanity. This teaching is beautifully conveyed in the words

> Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. (Mt 5:8)

An important feature in texts of the New Testament and a feature we will encounter in many early Christian writings is the pronounced link the apostles establish between the heart and the interior, spiritual worship of God. This link is perhaps best explored by considering first the notion of faith and its deep impact on the heart. Peter suggests the following:

> And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them [the Gentiles] by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. (Acts 15:8-9)

According to Peter, faith purifies the heart and initiates the process of conversion. By believing in the good news and embracing Christ as the Son of God, the heart is opened and able to receive divine teachings:

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[161] Behm, *TDNT* 3.611.

> A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us . . . . The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. (Acts 16:14)

As divine instruction takes root in the fertile ground of the heart and the process of conversion blossoms, Christians ponder God's teachings within themselves and gradually learn to act upon them.[162] They progressively deepen the heart's understanding of these teachings, embrace the virtuous life, and become true disciples of the Lord. The effect of this process is deeply transformative:

> But what does it say? "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Rom 10:8-9)

Faith softens the heart, inclines it toward God, and enables individuals to surrender to Christ and his message. This conversion, or *metanoia*, opens up the path to the Kingdom of Heaven by inviting the Son of God to fill a person's innermost self with his divine presence.[163] Paul suggests the following:

> I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. (Eph 3:16-17)

Through faith, Christ lives in the heart of the professed Christian (Gal 2:2:20-21). Once a market place, this inner region becomes a temple, which radiates with the light of Divinity. The presence of the Redeemer grants Christians courage, strength, and inner peace.[164] The heart is made receptive to divine teachings and progressively strengthened also by the inner presence of the Spirit

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[162] Bovenmars (1991), p. 108.
[163] Bovenmars (1991), p. 105.
[164] Bovenmars (1991), p. 110.

who guides the process of renewal along the lines revealed by the Son. Paul points to the heart as the abode of the Holy Spirit on many occasions:

> But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment. (2 Cor 1:22)

> And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God. (Gal 4:6-7)

Bearing in mind the above comments on the heart, its relationship to faith, and its function as the temple of Christ and the Spirit, let us now consider the close association of this interior dimension with the spiritual worship of God. Once the heart has been renewed through faith and serves as a divine dwelling-place, the need for a physical temple structure where ritually pure worshippers offer animal sacrifices ceases to exist. The temple, the sacrificial rite, and the priestly office are no longer limited to the material realm but come to constitute an inner reality. While the spiritual interpretation of the temple motif is already suggested in the Old Testament,[165] it becomes a central teaching only in the New Testament. Here, it is resoundingly proclaimed by Paul:

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[165] Bovenmars (1991), p. 13. For passages discussing the spiritual conception of sacrifice and of the temple motif, see, for instance, Psalms 51:10, 16-17: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. . . . For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." Other biblical verses that are of interest within this context are Psalms 140:2: "Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice;" Malachi 1:11: "For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering;" 1 Samuel 15:22: "Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams;" Hosea 6:6: "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt

> I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. (Rom 12:1)
>
> Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Eph 5:18-20)

These words provide insight into the New Testament teaching on the heart as the new spiritual temple. Worshippers need no longer seek out the physical shrine to offer their sacrifice. Their innermost core has become the sacrificial site.[166] Christians whose hearts have been purified through the ongoing guidance of Christ and the Spirit are transformed into perfect vessels of divine glorification. They bear within themselves the means of praising and drawing uniquely close to God at any time and in any place.

The New Testament doctrine of the heart as God's spiritual temple is a vital aspect of early Christian mystical theology and

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offerings;" and Micah 6:6-8: "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? . . . . He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Gaillard discusses this feature by drawing attention to Isaiah 57:15 and 66:1-2: "I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite" (Is 57:15); "Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is my resting place? All these things my hand has made, and so all these things are mine, says the Lord. But this is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit, who trembles at my word" (Is 66:1-2); see Jean Gaillard, "Domus Dei," in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité,* ed. Marcel Viller, Ferdinand Cavallera, and J. de Guibert (Paris: G. Beauchesne et ses fils, 1932-1995), vol. 3, p. 1554.

166 Paul Bradshaw, *Early Christian Worship* (Collegeville, MI: Liturgical Press, 1996), p. 52.

shapes the tradition of the prayer of the heart to a large degree. Time after time, we will return to the discussion of this important teaching. We will see how the interiorization of the biblical temple motif allowed ascetic practitioners to establish direct, intimate contact with Divinity. Inner prayer was of such power as to introduce humans to the heavenly realm and to allow for their participation in the angelic liturgy before the throne of God. The spiritual celebration of the liturgy revealed to them the peace and glory of the world to come.

As we inquire into this teaching, we will also have occasion to observe that the ability to participate in the angelic liturgy and to establish direct contact with Divinity through inner prayer does not call into question the external glorification of God. For members of the ancient church, commitment to inner prayer did not render the importance of the church, its liturgy, and its communal setting void. It did not divorce Christians from the reality of earthly, embodied existence. Despite their wish to interiorize the worship experience, ascetics viewed the mystical life as firmly rooted in the here and now. If they called upon their audience to heed Paul's advice to make melody to the Lord in the heart, they did so with the understanding that the interior liturgy, no less than the exterior liturgy, calls for the transcendence of strife and the ongoing pursuit of peaceful relations with fellow beings.

With the above comments on the conception of the heart in the Old and the New Testament in mind, let us now turn our attention to the Syrian church, which is most directly linked to the Semitic world out of which Christianity sprang.[167] As we do so, we will see that its teaching is deeply committed to the scriptural tradition of the heart and to the reconceptualization of the temple motif in terms of an inner, spiritual reality. By considering salient passages, initially from the writings of Aphrahat and Ephrem and, thereafter, from the *Macarian Homilies*, we will have the opportunity to observe just how great an impact biblical teaching exerted over the mystical thought of early Christianity.

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[167] Brock (1987), p. x.

2 THE PRAYER OF THE HEART: ITS SYRIAN CHRISTIAN BACKGROUND

APHRAHAT

The Syrian Christian tradition, which constitutes a vital part of Oriental Christianity, has frequently been overlooked, attention having been given primarily to the Latin West and the Greek East.[168] This fact is lamentable, for the early Syrian church was in possession of a rich mystical tradition and the proud owner of a large set of ascetical writings. Fortunately, this oversight has been redressed over the course of the past decades by prominent Syriac scholars, such as Sebastian Brock, Kathleen McVey, Robert Murray, David Miller, and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, who have translated Syriac texts into English and presented in-depth commentaries on their content.[169]

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[168] Brock (1987), p. x.

[169] See, for instance, Brock (1987). In this work, Brock provides a helpful general introduction to Syrian Christianity and presents excerpts from major early Christian mystical writings. For further translations, see Sebastian Brock, *The Harp of the Spirit: Eighteen Poems of Saint Ephrem*, 2nd enl. ed., (San Bernardino, CA: Borgo Press, 1984); idem, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990); idem, *Bride of Light: Hymns of Mary from the Syriac Churches* (Kottayam: St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 1994); idem, *Isaac of Nineveh: Ascetical Homilies, 'the Second Part', Chapters IV-XLI* (Lovanii: in aedibus Peeters, 1995). Translations by Kathleen McVey include *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns (*New York: Paulist Press, 1989). For works by Robert Murray, see, in particular, his *Symbols of Church and Kingdom. A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975). For works by Susan Ashbrook Harvey, see, for instance, Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Asceticism and Society in Crisis: John of Ephesus and the Lives of the Eastern Saints* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990); Sebastian Brock and Susan

Hence, it is now possible to examine this tradition in greater detail and to gain a better sense of its timeless wisdom.

Syriac was spoken by early Christians living in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire and in the Persian Empire, a region that today falls within the borders of south-east Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and western Iran.[170] Syriac is a Semitic language, a dialect of Aramaic, and was first found in pagan inscriptions of the first three centuries CE. With the translation of the Bible into Syriac, it became an important theological and liturgical language for large parts of Oriental Christianity. Syriac survives in late antique to early medieval Christian texts and remains the liturgical language of a range of churches, primarily the three Oriental Orthodox churches (Maronite, Syrian Orthodox, Church of the East).[171]

Given its close relationship to biblical Hebrew, it is hardly surprising that, in Syriac, the word for heart, *lebbâ*, has the same wide range of meaning *lēb* enjoys in the Old Testament.[172] Like biblical writings, Syriac texts point to the heart as the vital center of a human being and as the source of life itself. This feature is beautifully demonstrated in the work of two early Syrian ascetics, Aphrahat, the Persian sage, and Ephrem of Nisibis. Their writings were conceived prior to 400, a period during which Syrian Christianity was still only barely Hellenized. Hence, these writings are of great value as the only extant witnesses to a genuinely Semitic form of Christianity.[173]

Ashbrook Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998).

[170] Sebastian Brock, "The Syriac Tradition," pp. 199-215, in Jones, Wainwright, and Jarnold (1986), p. 203.

[171] Brock (1986), p. 203. See also John F. Healy, "Syriac," pp. 466-67, in *The Blackwell Dictionary of Eastern Christianity*, ed. K. Parry, D. J. Melling, D. Brody, S. H. Griffith, and J. F. Healy (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), p. 466.

[172] For a brief yet thorough discussion of this feature, see Deirdre Ann Dempsey, "The Phrase 'Purity of Heart in Early Syriac Writings,'" pp. 31-44, in Luckman and Kulzer (1999), pp. 32-34.

[173] Brock distinguishes between the Semitic and the Hellenic poles of Syrian Christianity yet points to a continuum between these two extremes.

Little is known of Aphrahat, the first major Syrian church father and ascetical writer whose work survived. Aphrahat's approximate dates have to be surmised from his writings, as does any insight into the circumstances of his life. He appears to have flourished in the early fourth century (c. 270-345). A surviving synodical letter denouncing clerical abuses written by Aphrahat to the bishops in Persia suggests that he held a high-ranking position in the Persian church and may have been a bishop.[174]

Aphrahat was an ascetic who belonged to a movement called the *bnay (or bnāt) qyāmā*, that is, the "sons (or daughters) of the covenant." Members of this movement followed the native Syrian tradition of the consecrated life, which was a forerunner of the main, Egyptian-inspired monasticism that spread into Syria starting in the late fourth century.[175] The *bnay qyāmā* placed great emphasis on baptism, the decisive moment at which the soul was betrothed to Christ, the heavenly Bridegroom. Baptism marked the beginning of a life dedicated to the pursuit of virginity and holiness, a way of life seekers chose in the hope of anticipating in their lifetime the splendor with which Adam had been endowed before the fall and which could only be fully realized at the resurrection.[176] The sacrament of baptism also marked the point at which members of the covenant, or the *īhīdāyē,* as Aphrahat also terms them (i.e. the followers of the "Only-Begotten," the *Īhīdāyā*), were incorporated into the unity of the body of Christ and acquired a new identity given "in the Spirit." This new identity allowed them to share in Christ's

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He suggests that "even a writer like Ephrem, one of our main witnesses to the Semitic pole, is certainly not free from the influence of Greek thought, but this influence affects only the surface and never the deep structures of his thought patterns and mode of expression," see Brock (1987), p. xii.

[174] Robert Lavenant, "Aphraates," in *Encyclopedia of the Early Church*, ed. Angelo Di Berardino (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) vol. 1, p. 54; McGuckin (2004b), v.s. "Aphrahat," p. 19.

[175] Brock (1987), p. xxi. Brock uses the term "proto-monasticism" to describe the tradition and indicates that its distinct features were absorbed into monasticism inspired by the Egyptian model over the course of the fifth century.

[176] Brock (1987), pp. xxi-xxv.

divine sonship and to conceive of God as their eternal "Father."[177] It enabled them to transcend divisions imposed by temporal existence and to meet contemporaries as equals. Fraternal charity was of great importance, and, despite their commitment to a life of contemplation and celibacy, members of the covenant remained actively involved in the day-to-day affairs of the church, living in small informal groups amid larger Christian communities.[178] Married *ihīdāyē* continued to live with their spouses, although they, too, led a life of continence.

Aphrahat's writings, his *Twenty-Three Demonstrations,* survive in their entirety. Devoid of standard Nicene doctrine,[179] "systematic" thinking, or Greek philosophical teaching, they are steeped in Semitic thought and bear the mark of "targumic traditions,[180] handed down from the earliest Judaeo-Christian communities of Mesopotamia before the rupture between Church and Synagogue."[181] The first ten of Aphrahat's *Demonstrations* were composed in 337 as a set of dialogues for the guidance of fellow ascetics. They address a variety of topics, including faith, love, fasting, prayer, the ascetical lifestyle, penance, and humility. *Demonstration* 6 is explicitly addressed to members of the covenant and provides the earliest reference to the movement.[182] The next twelve treatises were written

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[177] John D. Zizioulas, "The Early Christian Community," pp. 23-43, in McGinn, Meyendorff, and Leclercq (1987), pp. 29-30.

[178] Brock addresses the nature of this lifestyle in Sebastian Brock, *Spirituality in the Syriac Tradition* (Kerala, India: SEERI, 1989), p. 52; see also Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 329.

[179] The observation that Aphrahat shows no awareness of standard Nicene christology and trinitarian doctrine may be explained by the fact that Syria sent no delegates to Nicaea and remained largely unaware of the council's importance until late in the fourth century. Ephrem the Syrian was the first major theologian who tried, retrospectively, to bring the Syrian church in line with Nicene Orthodoxy; see Lavenant, *EEC* 1.54; Aphrahat, *Unterweisungen*, trans. and intr. Peter Bruns (Freiburg: Herder Verlag, 1991), vol. 1, pp. 56-57.

[180] I.e. traditions that are based on Aramaic oral paraphrases and translations of the Hebrew Bible.

[181] Lavenant, *EEC* 1.54.

[182] Dempsey (1999), p. 36.

between 343 and 345 and are mainly concerned with Jewish-Christian dialogue and Jewish objections to the church. The last *Demonstration* was composed in 345 at the start of Shapur II's persecution of Christians and is an essay on biblical history and the end of times.

Of particular interest within the context of this study is *Demonstration* 4 which is devoted to the topic of prayer. It is the first exposition on the subject that does not take as its starting-point the explication of the Lord's Prayer.[183] In the treatise, Aphrahat follows biblical lore and presents the heart as the spiritual center of a human being. He agrees with the authors of Scripture that the heart serves as God's temple, provided it has been purified and reintroduced to its original, pristine state. Aphrahat impresses upon his audience the need for a pure heart from the outset of the exposition:

> Purity of heart constitutes prayer more than do all the prayers that are uttered out aloud, and silence united to a mind that is sincere is better than the loud voice of someone crying out. My beloved, give me now your heart and your thought, and hear about the power of pure prayer; see how our righteous forefathers excelled in their prayer before God, and how it served them as a pure offering.[184]

For Aphrahat, prayer is an internalized sacrifice, and any sacrifice presented to God has to be offered from an unblemished site. By emphasizing prayer as a pure, spiritual offering and as greatly dependent on a worshipper's inner disposition, Aphrahat continues to align himself with biblical teaching and invites comparison with two Old Testament texts in particular, Malachi 1:11 and Psalms 140:2:[185]

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[183] As is the case, for instance, with the well-known expositions on prayer by Origen and Tertuallian; see Brock (1987), p. 2.

[184] Aphrahat, *Dem* 4.1, in Brock (1987), p. 5.

[185] For Aphrahat's debt to Malachi 1:11, see Brock (1987), p. 3; Dempsey (1999), p. 37; McGuckin (1999), p. 91, n. 60. For the link between Aphrahat and Psalms 140:2, see McGuckin (1999), p. 91, n. 60. The

> For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering. (Mal 1:11)
>
> Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice. (Ps 140:2)

Aphrahat's interpretation of prayer as an interior offering also calls to mind the prevalent New Testament teaching which, as we saw in the previous chapter, embraces the spiritual conception of sacrifice and which is captured succinctly by Paul's call to the Romans to present their bodies "as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom 12:1).

The Persian sage resumes his fourth *Demonstration* by enumerating the many benefits that humans reap by offering a pure sacrifice of prayer. Once again, Semitic diction dominates his discourse:

> Hear then, my beloved, about this pure prayer, and what powers have been manifest in it. . . . Our father Jacob too prayed at Bethel and saw the gate of heaven opened, with a ladder going up on high. . . . What then are we to say about the boundless power of Moses' prayer? For his prayer saved him from the hands of Pharaoh, and it showed him the Shekinah of his God. . . . Jonah also prayed before his God from the depths of the sea, and he was heard and answered, and was delivered without suffering any harm; for his prayer pierced the depths, conquered the waves and overpowered tempests; it pierced the cloud, flew through the air, opened the heavens, and approached the throne of majesty by means of Gabriel who brings prayers before God. As a result the depths vomited up the prophetic man, and the fish brought Jonah safely to dry land.[186]

The above words allow us to see that Aphrahat continues the biblical tradition according to which pure prayer is a valuable tool

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importance in early Christianity of prayer as a pure offering is discussed in R. P. C. Hanson, *Eucharistic Offering in the Early Church* (Bramcote, Notts.: Grove Books, 1979).

[186] Aphrahat, *Dem* 4.4-8, in Brock (1987), pp. 8-12.

of establishing close relations with God. By offering a prayer that arises from an upright, receptive heart, the gates of heaven may be opened and the Shekinah of God encountered. If the faithful follow Hannah's example (1 Sam 1:13) and call upon the Lord from a pure heart, they, too, may hope to have their prayers answered.[187] The Persian sage reiterates his teaching on the heart as the locus of inner worship and of divine-human communion in the following passage:

> Our Lord's words thus tell us 'pray in secret in your heart, and shut the door'. What is the door He says we must shut, if not your mouth? For here is the temple in which Christ dwells, just as the Apostle said: *You are the temple of the Lord* for Him to enter into your inner person, into this house, to cleanse it from everything that is unclean, while the door—that is to say, your mouth—is closed.[188]

Aphrahat is greatly invested in the idea of the heart as a place of divine indwelling. If Christians pray by raising their heart upward, lowering their eyes downward, and entering silently into themselves,[189] they gradually transform the secret chamber of the heart into an unblemished site, fit to house the heavenly Bridegroom. Once the Bridegroom has come to dwell permanently in his earthly temple, he assists seekers in their ongoing struggle for perfection.[190]

Aphrahat's conception of prayer as a pure, interior sacrifice offered in the heart is a prominent feature of his doctrine. As suggested above, a spiritual reading of the sacrificial rite, while fully developed only in the New Testament, is not absent from Old Testament texts. In a few instances, it is even linked specifically to the

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[187] Aphrahat, *Dem* 4.8, in Brock (1987), p. 11.

[188] Aphrahat, *Dem* 4.10, in Brock (1987), p. 14.

[189] Aphrahat, *Dem* 4.13, in Brock (1987), p. 17.

[190] Aphrahat, *Dem* 4.10, in Brock (1987), p. 14; idem, *Dem* 6.8 (on the sons/daughters of the covenant), in Bruns (1991), vol. 1, p. 197.

heart.[191] The spiritual conception of worship is explored also in the works of first century Jewish authors, amongst them Philo of Alexandria, who suggests that the only sacrifice worthy of God is the pure mind and soul.[192] Pre-Christian Jewish apocalyptic writings, such as the texts of the sectarian Jewish community at Qumran, likewise affirm the developing idea that the inner temple rather than the physical temple allows for the encounter with God.[193]

Yet despite the Jewish origins of this teaching, Christians believed that they fulfilled God's call for the continuous offering of unblemished sacrifices most authentically.[194] Their offerings, they proposed, were preferable to those presented by pagans and Jews, for Christians alone fully met God's demand for a sacrifice that was offered with an upright heart and a good conscience. Christ's followers gave their purified bodies as living sacrifices (1 Cor 6:19; Rom 12:1) and praised the Lord by engaging in kind, generous deeds (Heb 13:15-16).

This teaching is advanced by a number of extant early Christian texts, two important sources with which Aphrahat is likely to have been familiar being the *Odes of Solomon*, a document written originally in Syriac and dated to the second century, and the *Didache*, a book on church discipline believed to have originated in Syria in the late first to mid-second century.[195] Indications of a

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[191] See, for instance, Sirach 39:5 of the Syriac Bible; as cited in Brock (1987), p. xxvi.

[192] Bradshaw (1996), p. 51.

[193] Bradshaw (1996), p. 51; Alexander Golitzin, "Temple and Throne of the Divine Glory," pp. 107-129, in Luckman and Kulzer (1999), p. 117.

[194] Hanson (1979), pp. 3-4.

[195] *Odes of Solomon* 20:1-5: "I am a priest of the Lord, and Him I serve as a priest; and to Him I offer the offering of His thought. For His thought is not like the world, nor like the flesh, nor like them who worship according to the flesh. The offering of the Lord is righteousness, and purity of heart and lips. Offer your inward being faultlessly; and let not your compassion oppress compassion; and let not yourself oppress a self;" in *Odes of Solomon,* ed. and trans. James Hamilton Charlesworth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 85; *Didache* 14:1-2: "On the Lord's Day of the Lord come together, break bread and hold Eucharist, after confessing your transgressions that your offering may be pure; but let none who has a quarrel with his fellow join in your meeting until they be reconciled, that

"pure offering" doctrine can also be found in the second century Greek document *The Shepherd of Hermas* and in a passage from the Greek *Epistle of Barnabas*.[196]

With his emphasis on the inherent link between purity of heart and sacrifice, Aphrahat therefore drew on a growing tradition that conceived of an offering not in material but in spiritual terms. The faithful continued to offer their sacrifice from a cultically pure site. This site, however, was no longer the physical structure of the temple but rather the inner region of the purified heart. Since Christ, the Lifegiver, "gave His blood in place of all men,"[197] animal sacrifices were no longer required. Prayer had become the primary means of conversing with God. Aphrahat was acutely aware of this reconceptualization and, despite his debt to the Semitic tradition, was eager to expound his ascetical doctrine in a genuine Christianized context:[198]

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your sacrifice be not defiled;" in *Apostolic Fathers*, ed. and trans. Kirsopp Lake, LCL (London: Heinemann; New York Putnam, 1912-1913), vol. 1, p. 330; reference to these passages can be found in Hanson (1979), pp. 4-5.

[196] *The Shepherd of Hermas* 56:8: "If then you thus fulfil the fast as I commanded you, your 'sacrifice shall be acceptable to God,' and this fast shall be written down to your credit, and the service which is thus done is good and joyful and acceptable to the Lord;" in Lake (1912-1913), vol. 2, p. 161. *Epistle of Barnabas* 2:7-10: "And again he says to them, 'Did I command your fathers when they came out of the land of Egypt to offer me burnt offerings and sacrifices? Nay, but rather did I command them this: Let none of you cherish any evil in his heart against his neighbour, and love not a false oath.' We ought then to understand, if we are not foolish, the loving intention of our Father, for he speaks to us, wishing that we should not err like them, but seek how we may make our offering to him. To us then he speaks thus: 'Sacrifice for the Lord is a broken heart, a smell of sweet savour to the Lord is a heart that glorifieth him that made it.' We ought, therefore, brethren, carefully to enquire concerning our salvation, in order that the evil one may not achieve a deceitful entry into us and hurl us away from our life;" in Lake (1912-1913), vol. 1, p. 345; reference to these passages can be found in Hanson (1979), p. 5.

[197] Aphrahat, *Dem* 2.6 (on love), in Frank Hudson Hallock, *Journal of the Society of Oriental Research* 14 (1930): 21.

[198] Alexander Golitzin, "The Place of the Presence of God: Aphrahat of Persia's Portrait of the Christian Holy Man," An Essay in Honor of

> For the uses of the law are abolished by the advent of our Lifegiver, and He offered up Himself in the place of the sacrifices which are in the law, and He was led as a lamb to the slaughter in the place of the lambs of propitiation. . . . He gave His blood in place of all men, that the blood of animals might not be required of us.[199]
>
> Sins are washed away in water, and prayer converses with God's majesty. See, my beloved, how sacrifices and offerings have been rejected, and prayer chosen in their place.[200]

Aphrahat presents his vision of prayer as a spiritual sacrifice vividly in the *Demonstrations*. The richness of this description owes much to the use of two prominent motifs, the motif of fire descending from heaven and the motif of the angelic liturgy. Both images are integral to his mystical doctrine and situate it firmly within a liturgical context. Let us take a moment to pay closer attention to this important feature. If we bear in mind that the Christian liturgy is inherently relational, uniting, as it does, members of the earthly and the divine community, we will have a first opportunity to note that Aphrahat does not envision a life dedicated to inner prayer as a solitary pursuit of perfection.[201] We will be able to observe that the Persian sage was greatly committed to the communal nature of the mystical lifestyle. For Aphrahat, as for fellow *ihīdāyē,* pure prayer was situated within a social context and failed to be of benefit if practiced in isolation. His interest in the motifs of fire descending from heaven and the angelic liturgy attests to this commitment.

As in so many instances, Aphrahat relies on Scripture to provide him with both of the above motifs. In his fourth *Demonstration*, he introduces the motif of fire descending from heaven by drawing attention to Judges 13:20 (Manoah's sacrifice), 1 Kings 18:38

Archimandrite Aimilianos of the Monastery of Simonos Petras, Mount Athos (2003), p. 5; http://www.marquette.edu/maqom/aimilianos.html.

[199] Aphrahat, *Dem* 2.6, in Hallock (1930): 21.

[200] Aphrahat, *Dem* 4. 19, in Brock (1987), p. 24-25.

[201] Brown (1988), p. 336.

(Elijah's sacrifice), 1 Chronicles 21:26 (David's sacrifice), and 2 Chronicles 7:1 (Solomon's sacrifice). He gives special prominence to Genesis 4:4, in which Abel's sacrifice is expounded:[202]

> First of all, it was through Abel's purity of heart that his offering was acceptable before God, while that of Cain was rejected. And how do we know that Abel's offering was accepted, while Cain's was rejected? . . . You are aware, my beloved, that an offering that was acceptable before God was distinguished by the fact that the fire would descend from heaven and the offering would be consumed by it. Now when Abel and Cain offered up their offerings both together, living fire that was doing service before God came down and devoured Abel's pure sacrifice, but did not touch Cain's because it was impure. . . . And the fruits of Cain's heart later testified and showed that he was full of deceit, when he killed his brother: for what his mind had conceived, his hands brought to birth. But Abel's purity of heart constitutes his prayer.[203]

The motif of fire descending from heaven indicates that Abel's offering is pleasing to God and has been accepted. By employing it, Aphrahat suggests to members of his audience that they, too, may find favor with God and witness the consumption of their offering, provided it is presented from an upright heart. If Christians follow Abel's example and conduct themselves in a virtuous manner, they will be able to experience the descent of God into

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[202] As pointed out by Brock, it is likely that Aphrahat here resorted to a revision of the Septuagint by Theodotion, who, unlike most ancient and modern translators of the biblical passage, introduces the presence of divine fire into the account by rendering the Hebrew *wayyiša* not by "and (God) had regard for (Abel and his offering)" but rather by "and he enfired;" see Brock (1987), p. 3; idem, "Fire from Heaven: from Abel's Sacrifice to the Eucharist. A Theme in Syriac Christianity," pp. 229-243, in *Fire from Heaven: Studies in Syriac Theology and Liturgy,* VCSS (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), p. 231; idem, "Jewish Tradition in Syriac Sources," pp. 212-232, in *Studies in Syriac Christianity: History, Literature, and Theology,* VCSS (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 1992), p. 225.

[203] Aphrahat, *Dem* 4.2, in Brock (1987), p. 6.

their heart and the transformation of this inner region into a divine shrine.

Aphrahat reinforces the liturgical conceptualization of inner prayer by associating the motif of devouring fire with the image of the Holy Spirit, as it descends onto the elements at the epiclesis, an association he suggests by referring to the coming of "living fire that was doing service before God" in the above words. The sage's allusion to the consecratory role of the Holy Spirit during the anaphora and, hence, his contextualization of prayer within a Eucharistic frame of reference would not have been lost on members of the audience.[204] They would have understood that the sacrifice of pure prayer invites the descent of the Holy Spirit into the heart and its transfiguration in much the same way in which the elements offered on the visible altar are sanctified by the Spirit during public worship. Like the inner sanctuary of the physical temple, the transformed heart provides direct access to God:

> And also the Blessed Apostle thus said: *You are the temple of God and the Spirit of Christ dwells in you*. And also our Lord again thus said to His disciples: *You are in Me and I am in you* (Jn 14:20).[205]

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[204] Brock (2006), p. 229. The ancient East Syrian Eucharistic prayer of Addai and Mari, who are said to have evangelized Edessa, Seleucia-Ctesiphon, and the surrounding country, reads as follows: "May your Holy Spirit, Lord, come and rest on this offering of your servants, and bless and sanctify it;" cited in Bradshaw (1996), p. 61.

[205] Aphrahat, *Dem* 1.3 (on faith), in *NPNF* II.13, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956), p. 346. Within this context, two points deserve brief mention. Firstly, it is notable that, in this particular instance, Aphrahat points to the Spirit as the subject of indwelling. On other, more frequent occasions, he focuses on Christ as the divine agent who inhabits the heart; see Murray (1975), p. 225. Secondly, it bears keeping in mind that Aphrahat, like other early Syriac writers, moves between the Spirit as the Holy Spirit and as the Spirit of Christ with great ease; see Brock (2006), p. 236. Both features reinforce the idea that Aphrahat does not regard the clear delineation of theological concepts as a pressing matter. His doctrine is not subject to the detailed rational explication characteristic of much Nicene and post-Nicene theology.

In his attempt to highlight the liturgical, relational context of inner prayer, Aphrahat introduces a further motif, the motif of the angelic liturgy. It is an image he develops with great interest in his fourteenth *Demonstration,* a stylistically unusual piece of writing in that it is an epistle to the church of Seleucia-Ctesiphon written by the sage on behalf of a local synod. In it, Aphrahat addresses a variety of matters yet focuses on the many internal problems that afflict the Persian church, including the shortcomings of its clergy.[206] He interrupts his admonition on a number of occasions and, on one such occasion, presents a description of the glorified sage. As he does so, Aphrahat reiterates his conception of the heart as the new temple of God, this time including a detailed description of its interior:

> Who has insight into the place of understanding? . . . Whoever has opened the door of his heart finds it . . . . He [the sage] becomes the great temple of his Creator. Indeed, the King of the Heights enters and dwells in him, and lifts his intellect up to the heights, . . . and his heart is rapt in all its perception. He [the King] shows him a thing that he never knew. He gazes on that place and contemplates it, and his mind is stupefied by everything that it sees: all the watchers hastening to his ministry, the seraphim chanting the thrice-holy [lit. "sanctifying"] to his glory, flying swiftly with their wings, and their vestments white and shining, their faces are covered at his radiance, their courses swifter than the wind, there is the throne of the kingdom established.[207]

Aphrahat's description of the interior liturgy is rich indeed. Descending into the heart, the glorified sage witnesses the awe-inspiring nature of the heavenly communal celebration. The mind is stupefied as it contemplates the angelic lower clergy, the watchers, hurrying to accomplish their ministry, while the seraphic priests, clothed in shining vestments and covering their faces from

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[206] Golitzin (2003), p. 2.

[207] The English translation of this passage has been taken from Golitzin (2003), pp. 3-4. Golitzin also presents a valuable discussion of the passage.

the blinding radiance of Divinity, chant the celestial *Trisagion* (the Thrice-Holy) before God's throne. No prior experience can be likened to the self-disclosure of Deity in the human heart. The sage is drawn into the ranks of the angels and joins the eschatological messianic community. Here, strife does not exist, and genuine relatedness is a reality. In the company of the angels, the sage knows the peace, equality, and unity of the heavenly realm. He experiences true catholicity which lies in the transcendence of all divisions in Christ.[208]

Aphrahat looks to God's vigilant ministers, the angels, with great interest. For him, they are the spiritual ideal to which Christians who seek perfection aspire; they are the model after which sages mold themselves.[209] The angels are also important intermediaries and facilitate the divine-human encounter by presenting spiritual offerings to God:

> You who pray should remember that you are making an offering before God: let not Gabriel who presents the prayers be ashamed by an offering that has a blemish. When you pray to be forgiven, and acknowledge that you yourself forgive, consider first in your mind whether you really do forgive and only then acknowledge 'I forgive'.[210]

These words emphasize the mediating activity of the angels and reiterate the importance of offering a pure sacrifice. In a subsequent passage, Aphrahat expounds on this point by noting that Gabriel will refuse to present an offering before God if forgiveness has not been granted. The need for reconciliation is ever on his mind:

> When you bring an offering and remember you have some grudge against your brother, leave your offering in front of the

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[208] Zizioulas (1987), pp. 29-30; see also John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), p. 162.

[209] Brock (1987), p. xxv.

[210] Aphrahat, *Dem* 4.13, in Brock (1987), pp. 17-18.

> altar, and go and be reconciled with your brother; then come back and make your offering (Mt 5:23-24).[211]

Notable about both of the above citations is Aphrahat's emphasis on forgiveness and reconciliation, that is, on personal relatedness. The celebration of the interior liturgy of the heart does not merely usher in new relations with members of the heavenly church. It also allows for the deepening of human relationships.[212] For Aphrahat, the ability to reach out to fellow beings, to forgive, and to seek reconciliation is a development that occurs as a matter of course in all who strive for spiritual advancement. As practitioners of inner prayer begin the process of purification and gain in virtue, they learn to adopt a more forgiving stance toward their contemporaries. They empty the heart of evil and are free to perceive the onset of kindness and compassion. Christians who seek perfection acquire a new identity; they become divine children and enjoy by grace the sonship Christ enjoys by nature.[213] This new identity allows them to overcome human boundaries and to approach their neighbors as equals. It allows love to flow freely and generously.

A clear indication that Aphrahat believes inner prayer and charitable conduct to be inherently linked can be seen in his emphasis on purity of heart as the very essence of prayer. He proposes that purity of heart, that is, engagement in noble, generous deeds, is prayer itself. If the fruits of Abel's heart testify to his goodness and constitute his prayer, our pure hearts, our charitable deeds, constitute our prayer. Aphrahat does not distinguish between these aspects of Christian existence. Philanthropic relief, purity of heart, and inner prayer are one and the same. The more Christians transcend imposed boundaries and seek to live their lives in the unity of Christ, the nobler their deeds, the truer their hearts, and the purer their prayers become.

Prayer as conceived by Aphrahat, then, is never limited to a silent withdrawal into the self and a solitary encounter with God.

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[211] Aphrahat, *Dem* 4.13, in Brock (1987), p. 18.
[212] Zizioulas (1987), p. 29.
[213] Zizioulas (1987), pp. 29-30.

While the Persian sage is a great proponent of interiority and does not call into question the value of conversing silently with God,[214] Christians engage in this practice primarily as a means to an end. It is a tool meant to guide them toward the true goal of Christian life, i.e. the ability to apprehend the presence of divine love in the world and to cultivate interpersonal relationships to which this presence gives rise.[215] Not surprisingly, Aphrahat therefore cautions his audience never to let prayer (as it is commonly understood) interfere with the endeavors to "give rest to the weary, visit the sick, [and] make provisions for the poor."[216] These acts, rather than the practice of formal prayer, constitute genuine worship and are most pleasing to God. They are the means by which humans effect the "rest" of the Lord:

> Watch out, my beloved, lest, when some opportunity of 'giving rest' to the will of God meets you, you say 'the time for prayer is at hand. I will pray and then act'. And while you are seeking to complete your prayer, that opportunity for 'giving rest' will escape from you: you will be incapacitated from doing the will and 'rest' of God, and it will be through your prayer that you will be guilty of sin. Rather, effect the 'rest' of God, and that will constitute prayer.[217]

Aphrahat presents his conception of prayer clearly and concisely. Prayer denotes all activities that are undertaken with the intention of easing the burden of fellow humans. Prayer implies reaching out to neighbors. It describes the Christian way of life even in what may appear to be the most ordinary and mundane of moments. In the following words, Aphrahat reiterates the idea that prayer may be purest in precisely such moments:

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[214] Hence, he writes: "I have written to you, my beloved, to the effect that a person should do the will of God, and that constitutes prayer. That is how prayer seems to me to excel. Nevertheless, just because I have said this to you, do not neglect prayer," *Dem* 4.16, in Brock (1987), p. 21.

[215] Juana Raasch, "The Monastic Concept of Purity of Heart and Its Sources (IV)," *SM* (1969): 272-282, cited in Dempsey (1999), pp. 36-38; McIntosh (1998), pp. 6-7.

[216] Aphrahat, *Dem* 4.14, in Brock (1987), p. 19.

[217] Aphrahat, *Dem* 4.14, in Brock (1987), p. 20.

> Or again, suppose you go on a journey during the winter and you meet rain and snow and get exhausted from cold. If once again you run into a friend of yours at the time of prayer and he answers you in the same way, and you die of cold, what profit will his prayer have, seeing that he has not alleviated someone in trouble? For our Lord, in his description of the time of judgement when he separated out those who were to stand on his right and on his left, said to those on his right: "I was hungry and you gave me to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me to drink, I was sick and you visited me, I was a stranger and you welcomed me in" (Mt 25:35). He spoke in the same sort of way to those on his left, and because they had done none of these things, He sent them into torment, while those on the right He sent into the kingdom.[218]

Given this understanding of prayer, it is little surprising that Aphrahat and fellow *īhīdāyē* chose to adopt a lifestyle that asked them to strike a balance between interiority, silence, and celibacy on the one hand and active involvement in the world on the other hand. The quest for God never excluded fellow beings. Members of the covenant viewed involvement in the many practical matters of daily existence as a valuable opportunity to effect the rest of God. Involvement in everyday tasks was their prayer and allowed them to glorify the Lord throughout the day, every day.

With these ideas in mind, it may be suggested that Aphrahat viewed the relational nature of Christian life as the driving force behind the gradual transformation of a person into God's temple. Because interpersonal relationships impel individuals to examine their patterns of thought and behavior, to acknowledge their strengths and weaknesses, and to ponder their mission in life, the communal setting of mystical existence initiates a process of inner growth and transformation that brings humans closer to their essential being and to the divine life that resides in their deepest selves, their hearts.[219] Commitment to the ascetical life and the continuous reaching out to fellow humans sensitizes individuals to the

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[218] Aphrahat, *Dem* 4.15, in Brock (1987), pp. 20-21.
[219] McIntosh (1998), pp. 6-7.

impact they can have on the world around them; it allows them to discern their true identity and uniqueness. A stronger sense of identity and purpose facilitated by a network of communal relationships, in turn, allows for heightened awareness of God's all-pervasive presence in the world and opens the door to greater intimacy with Divinity. Then again, greater intimacy with Divinity and the initiation into the heavenly church enable individuals to perceive their surroundings with newfound clarity and to overcome the many obstacles that keep humans apart.

As suggested in the introduction, this study is conducted in part with the intention of challenging the assumption that the mystical life, as it was conceived by early Christian theologians, implies withdrawal from the world and the solitary quest for God. Throughout this section, the attempt has therefore been made to show that Aphrahat did not envision a life of inner prayer as devoid of interpersonal exchange. It did not imply the shutting out of the surrounding world. On the contrary, Aphrahat insisted that greater intimacy with God can be attained only by heeding one's neighbor and by remaining closely connected to the local community. The true follower of Christ is the person who engages in active service and social philanthropy. The true follower of Christ imitates the latter's charitable deeds on a daily basis and, by doing so, reconciles humans to one another and to God.

To modern Christians living in the world and bound to it by numerous commitments, this teaching promises to be welcome news. By establishing that intimacy with God can be attained through ongoing interaction with the world, indeed, by suggesting that the apprehension of God in the inner temple of the heart depends on the cultivation of communal relations and "love in action," contemporary Christians have at their disposal a powerful tool of purifying their inner self and of transforming it into a divine temple. Even if unable to immerse themselves fully in a life of prayer and interiority, they are able to seek contact with God by taking advantage of the many opportunities to do the divine will which practical, everyday living provides. If they heed their neighbor, they have the means of offering the purest of sacrifices and of experiencing an intimacy with Divinity which they may not have believed attainable while exposed to the turmoils of worldly existence.

Now that we have considered Aphrahat's debt to the biblical tradition of the heart and its ramifications on a Christian life of prayer, it is time to turn our attention to a second prominent theologian of the early Syrian church, Ephrem of Nisibis. Let us explore Ephrem's understanding of the mystical lifestyle by addressing his debt to the Hebraic tradition of the heart and its holistic conception of human nature. Let us consider if Ephrem followed Aphrahat's lead and conceived of the pure heart as God's temple. Did he contribute to the reconceptualizaton of biblical temple imagery by presenting the celebration of the liturgy in terms of an inner, spiritual event? Was Ephrem as committed to a teaching that features a strong relational component and heralds the belief that God is encountered through involvement in communal, day-to-day existence? We will explore these questions in the section to come.

EPHREM THE SYRIAN

Born of Christian parents in c. 306, Ephrem was a deacon, catechetical teacher, and ascetic of the church of Nisibis, a town located on the most eastern frontier of the Roman Empire. Nisibis was repeatedly besieged and finally ceded to the Sassanids in 363, an event that forced the Christian population to leave the city. The elderly Ephrem relocated to Edessa, where he preached, taught, and served as hymn writer to a community of Christian virgins until his death in 373.[220]

Like Aphrahat, Ephrem was a member of the covenant, a follower of the Only-Begotten, and his teaching is greatly informed by the outlook of this early Syrian ascetic community. Ephrem elucidates this teaching in a large body of work which includes scriptural commentaries, refutations of dualistic speculations, letters, a discourse, homilies, and hymns.[221] He is best known for his large col-

[220] For biographical information, see Brock (1992), pp. 16-17; idem (1987), p. 30; McGuckin (2004b), v.s. "Ephrem the Syrian," pp. 118-119; F. Rilliet, "Ephrem the Syrian," *EEC* 1.276-277.

[221] For a helpful discussion of Ephrem's writings, see Brock (1992), pp. 17-19; idem (1990), pp. 33-36.

lection of hymns which is of such beauty and poetry as to establish him as the foremost Syrian hymnographer.[222]

Ephrem's hymns cover a wide selection of topics and address, amongst others, the church, the crucifixion, the nativity, the resurrection, virginity, fasting, faith, and heresies. They are deeply Semitic in character and abound with the use of scriptural symbols. For this reason, they are reminiscent of targumic and midrashic traditions known for their metaphorical reading of biblical texts and, like the writings of Aphrahat, show relatively few signs of systematic Greek thought patterns.[223]

Ephrem presents much of his teaching on inner prayer in the *Hymns on Faith*, a large cycle of hymns which, as the title suggests, is devoted to the explication of faith. In hymn 20 of this cycle, he pays special attention to the close link between prayer and faith. Ephrem writes:

> In a single body are both Prayer and Faith to be found, the one hidden, the other revealed; the one for the Hidden One, the other to be seen. Hidden prayer is for the hidden ear of God, while faith is for the visible ear of humanity.[224]

As humans struggle to turn from the road of darkness and injustice to the road of light and righteousness, Ephrem instructs them to let prayer wipe clean their murky thoughts and to let faith wipe clean their senses outwardly.[225] Once prayer and faith work in tandem, the one purifying the inner senses, the other the outer senses, human beings are able to collect themselves before God and to follow the heavenly *Īḥīdāyā* with single-mindedness.

Integral to Ephrem's understanding of prayer and faith and a reoccurring motif in his hymns is the image of the heart. Reminiscent of biblical writers and of Aphrahat, Ephrem views the heart as the very center of humans which defines them in their essential being. For him, the heart is not merely the seat of emotion but the

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[222] McGuckin (2004b), p. 118.
[223] Rilliet, *EEC* 1.276.
[224] Ephrem, *Faith* 20.10, in Brock (1987), p. 34.
[225] Ephrem, *Faith* 20.17, in Brock (1987), p. 35.

source of all thought, volition, and wisdom. If the heart is filled with desire, it is incapable of counsel.[226] The "wrath of the heart"[227] leaves seekers devoid of insight and discernment. Like Paul, Ephrem views the heart as the place where the good news is professed.[228] Here, faith takes root and grows.[229] The inability to embrace the good news single-mindedly results in a heart that is divided and prone to sin:

> A man's feet and eyes reprove him for being thus divided; the heart is like a toiling ox, equally divided, for it has divided itself up between two yokes, the righteous yoke, and that of injustice.[230]

Ephrem agrees with Aphrahat that the heart is the place where Christians offer their pure prayer. The compatibility of both teachings is particularly pronounced in a hymn which survives only in an Armenian translation and which, in its emphasis on the power of inner prayer, calls to mind Aphrahat's exposition in his fourth *Demonstration*:

> Prayer that rises up in someone's heart serves to open up for us the door of heaven: that person stands in converse with the Divinity and gives pleasure to the Son of God. Prayer makes peace with the Lord's anger and with the vehemence of his wrath. In this way too, tears that well up in the eyes can open the door of compassion.[231]

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[226] Dempsey (1999), p. 36.

[227] Ephrem, *Church* 14.7, in Edmund Beck, *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers: Hymnen de Ecclesia*, CSCO (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1960), p. 36.

[228] Ephrem, *Faith* 20.8, in Brock (1987), p. 34.

[229] Ephrem, *Church* 25.15, in Beck (1960), p. 57.

[230] Ephrem, *Faith* 20.15, in Brock (1987), p. 35.

[231] Ephrem, *Hymns Preserved in Armenian* 1.3, in Brock (1987), pp. 36. Brock points out that an element of doubt surrounds the authorship of this particular hymn. For passages in hymns that have been shown to be genuine works of Ephrem and that convey a very similar teaching, see, for instance, Ephrem's *Faith* 20.6: "Petition that has been refined is the virgin of the inner chamber: if she passes the door of the mouth, she is like one

Loyal to biblical teaching, Ephrem views the heart as the doorway to the supernatural realm. It is the meeting-place between God and the individual. By offering their prayers in the heart, humans ready themselves for the direct encounter with Divinity. They appease God and give pleasure to the Son. So great is the pleasure the faithful give to the Son that he takes up permanent residence in their innermost self, transforming it into his bridal chamber:

> How wonderful is this abundance
> that the Lord should reside in us continually,
> for He has left the heavens and descended:
> let us make holy for Him the bridal chamber of our hearts.[232]

Ephrem conveys a very similar teaching in a passage in which he addresses the notion of circumcision. Contrasting outward and inward circumcision and emphasizing the importance of the latter, he reiterates the belief that a pure, circumcised heart invites God to turn it into a divine dwelling-place. It is of interest to note that Ephrem, like Aphrahat, places his teaching, which owes so much to the Semitic tradition, within a Christian context:

> With a circumcised heart
> uncircumcision becomes holy:
> in the bridal chamber of such a person's heart
> the Creator resides.[233]

The above words convey the importance Ephrem accords to the spiritual worship of God. He, too, rejects external rituals, such as circumcision and the sacrifice of animals, and welcomes their replacement with interior rites. Pure inner prayer is the new Christian sacrifice. Baptism rather than circumcision is the means by which individuals become betrothed to the heavenly Bridegroom and members of the Christian community.

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astray. Truth is her bridal chamber, love her crown, stillness and silence are the trusty eunuchs at her door," in Brock (1987), p. 34. Ephrem here draws on the widespread early Christian understanding that the "inner chamber" of Matthew 6:6 refers to the heart, see Brock (2006), p. 240.

[232] Ephrem, *Armenian Hymns* 47.46-47, cited in Brock (1992), p. 128.

[233] Ephrem, *Virginity* 44.20, cited in Brock (1992), p. 128.

Ephrem's emphasis on spiritual worship prompts us to inquire if he, like Aphrahat, highlights this feature by employing the motif of the interior liturgy of the heart. Does he view the heart as a temple where divine fire descends onto the pure sacrifice of prayer, transforming a person's deepest self? Is the heart a place of communion where Christians join the angels in their praise of God and experience the equality of the eschatological messianic community? Is it a site where humans are reconciled to one another?

Ephrem repeatedly describes Divinity, especially the Holy Spirit, in terms of fire and places this symbol within a Eucharistic frame of reference:

> In fire is the symbol of the Spirit,
> it is a type of the Holy Spirit
> who is mixed in the baptismal water
> so that it may be for absolution,
> and in the bread,
> so that it may be an offering.[234]

Ephrem's symbolic use of fire in the context of the Eucharist is brought to the fore in yet another passage which vividly calls to mind the biblical motif of fire descending from heaven to consume the pure sacrifice:

> Fire descended in wrath and consumed sinners,
> the fire of mercy has now descended and dwelt in the bread.
> Instead of that fire which consumed mankind,
> you have consumed Fire in the Bread, and you have come to life!
> Fire descended and consumed Elijah's sacrifices,
> the fire of mercies has become a living sacrifice for us;
> Fire consumed the oblation,
> and we, Lord, have consumed your Fire in your oblations.[235]

The above words are highly suggestive of Aphrahat's references to the heart as the temple of God and as the place where the

[234] Ephrem, *Faith* 40.10, in Brock (2006), p. 234.
[235] Ephrem, *Faith* 10.12-13, in Brock (2006), pp. 234-235.

worthy offer their spiritual sacrifice, hoping for its acceptance and consummation. However, unlike Aphrahat, Ephrem does not appear to relate the consecratory role of divine fire specifically to the heart, speaking rather of its purifying and sanctifying effect on the body.[236] While he establishes an intimate link between the heart and faith and views the former as the site where humans offer their prayers, he does not contribute significantly to the interiorization of the temple motif. For him, the heart is first and foremost the bridal chamber where Christ, the heavenly Bridegroom, and the soul meet; it is less a liturgical site where the angels and the glorified sage jointly worship before the throne of God.

While Ephrem does not contribute to the reconceptualization of the biblical temple motif by presenting the heart as a place of liturgical celebration and spiritual communion, he nevertheless provides us with other teachings that are of considerable value to a better understanding of the prayer of the heart tradition, one such teaching being his conception of the body as God's temple. Greatly informed by the central Christian doctrine of the incarnation, Ephrem views the fact that God became enfleshed to redeem humankind as an important indicator of the body's inherent goodness. Without assuming flesh, the Son could not have set in motion a process that infuses human nature with life-giving energy:

> Glory to that Voice Which became Body, and to the Word of the High One Which became Flesh! Hear Him also, O ears, and see Him, O eyes, and feel Him, O hands, and eat Him, O mouth! Ye members and senses give praise unto Him, that came and quickened the whole body![237]

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[236] See, for instance: "When Moses signed and anointed the sons of the Levite Aaron, fire consumed their bodies, fire preserved their clothes. Blessed are you, my brethren, for the fire of mercy has come down, utterly devouring your sins, purifying and sanctifying your bodies," Ephrem, *Epiphany* 3.10, in Brock (2006), p. 234.

[237] Ephrem, *Nativity* 3.11, in *NPNF* II.13, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956), p. 232.

Ephrem establishes the body's inherent value by pointing to the Eucharist. Would Christ have "clothed himself in the Bread, seeing that bread is related to that feeble body,"[238] if he had despised the body as unclean and unworthy? Would Christians be permitted to consume the body and blood of Christ and to perceive Divinity within themselves if their bodies were impure and unfit to mingle with the Holy Mysteries?[239] Surely not. Ephrem makes a particularly strong case for the body's goodness and its importance to the apprehension of God in his renowned *Hymns on Paradise*. Let us consider this teaching and its implications for the tradition of the prayer of the heart in greater detail.

In his *Hymns on Paradise*, Ephrem describes the Kingdom of God as a mountain, a description that is repeatedly suggested in the Old Testament. He divides the divine mountain into three different levels, likening them, among other things, to the different parts of the Old Testament Temple (the holy place, the sanctuary veil, the holy of holies) and to the tripartite nature of humanity. With regard to the threefold structure of human nature, Ephrem suggests that the mountain's lower slopes relate to the body (*gushma*), its higher slopes to the soul (*naphsha*), and its heights to the intellectual spirit (*tar'itha*).[240] Although the body is less glorious than the soul and the spirit and can neither be likened to the sanctuary veil nor to the holy of holies, it is nevertheless indispensable to the discernment of God, for the soul "cannot have perception of Paradise without its mate, the body, its instrument and lyre."[241] The importance of the body as the soul's companion and instrument of perception is conveyed in the following passage:

> That the soul cannot see without the body's frame,
> the body itself persuades, since if the body becomes blind
> the soul is blind in it, groping about with it;
> see how each looks and attests to the other,
> how the body has need of the soul in order to live,

[238] Ephrem, *Heresies* 47.2, cited in Brock (1992), p. 37.
[239] Ephrem, *Heresies* 43.3, cited in Brock (1992), p. 37.
[240] Brock (1990), p. 53.
[241] Ephrem, *Paradise* 8.2, in Brock (1990), pp. 131-32.

> and the soul too requires the body in order to see and to hear.[242]

Ephrem views the body as an important vehicle through which humans apprehend the inner presence of Deity. The body enables the soul to sense God and to perceive a dimension—the divine, immaterial dimension—to whose reality no cognitive evidence can speak.[243] Without the body, the soul is deprived of strength, guidance, and insight:

> If the soul, while in the body, resembles an embryo
> and is unable to know either itself or its companion,
> how much more feeble will it then be once it has left the body,
> no longer possessing on its own the senses
> which are able to serve as tools for its use.
> For it is through the senses of its companion that it shines forth and becomes evident.[244]

We can deepen our understanding of Ephrem's views on the body by paying special attention to the last of the above cited lines. Through the body, Ephrem suggests, the soul does not only discern Divinity, but it is also given the opportunity to shine forth and to manifest its wishes. Christians depend on embodied existence to be available to the world and, by being available to the world, to do the will of God. Without the body, the faithful do not have a voice with which to console the weary and offer encouragement to the downcast. They cannot engage in what Aphrahat deems genuine prayer and give rest to humans and God alike. Just as the latter had need of a body to reveal to humankind the extent of divine mercy and love, the soul relies on the body to reveal its good intentions to fellow beings. In this manner, it is able to work toward greater harmony and justice; it is able to work toward peace. Ephrem wondered why the soul would be confined within the body if it

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[242] Ephrem, *Paradise* 8.4, in Brock (1990), p. 132.

[243] Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination* (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), pp. 175-176.

[244] Ephrem, *Paradise* 8.6, in Brock (1990), p. 133.

were able to see and to hear without it.[245] Very likely, he also wondered why the soul would be confined within the body, if it were able to manifest itself without the aid of its companion.

The idea that the body is an important vehicle through which humans give rest to the Lord is an integral aspect of Ephrem's mystical doctrine. The inherent link between embodied existence and our ability to draw into the presence of Divinity through charitable conduct is reiterated in the following passage:

> Elisha was the equal of the Watchers—in his doings, glorious and holy.—The camp of the Watchers was round about him;—thus let Baptism be unto you,—a camp of guardians,—for by means of it there dwells in the heart—the hope of them that are below—and the Lord of them that are above.—Sanctify for Him your bodies,—for where He abides, corruption comes not near.[246]

Ephrem concurs with Aphrahat that baptism signals a person's entrance into the earthly community of the Spirit, a community that foreshadows the peacefulness and equality of the heavenly community. By performing glorious and holy deeds, Christians emulate the perfection of the angels and effect their progressive sanctification. As God's dwelling-place, the body plays a prominent role in this process. It allows for the deepening of interpersonal relationships on which the quest for God is based. The body enables the soul to reach out to fellow beings and to overcome the many divisions that keep humans apart. Given this teaching, it is little surprising that the one well-attested episode of Ephrem's last years concerns his efforts to distribute food to the poor during a famine.[247]

While Ephrem does not greatly expound on the notion of the heart as the new Christian temple and as a place of liturgical celebration, the above discussion has hopefully indicated some of the

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[245] Ephrem, *Paradise* 8.3, in Brock (1990), p. 132.
[246] Ephrem, *Epiphany* 8.19, in Schaff (1956), p. 278.
[247] Brock (1992), p. 17.

ways in which his mystical doctrine contributed to the shaping of the prayer of the heart. For Ephrem, as for Aphrahat, the heart symbolized a person's truest self and was the place from which the faithful offered their pure prayer. Like Aphrahat, Ephrem was greatly indebted to the biblical concept of the heart as the doorway to heaven, but for him more so than for Aphrahat, the journey into the presence of God was inextricably linked to the body. In accordance with holistic biblical anthropology, he could not conceive of the soul's quest for perfection without the body. Deprived of its companion, the soul lacked an all-important means of apprehending God. If the perception of Divinity defied rational cognition, it did not defy the body's intuitive faculty. Divine reality could not be grasped intellectually. It could, however, be known viscerally. In the absence of all other evidence, the somatic perception of Deity attested to its inner presence.

As we have seen, a further reason why Ephrem deemed the body essential to Christian life was the understanding that it allowed the soul to manifest itself to the world. If the body had been an instrument of revelation to God, it was also an instrument of revelation to the individual soul. By means of its earthly vessel, the soul participated in the affairs of the world. It related to neighbors and overcame enmity. The body was a true mediator. It made the hidden manifest, thereby facilitating communion on all levels of human existence.

To conclude this discussion of Ephrem's contributions to the doctrine of the prayer of the heart, let us make one final observation. It is worth noting that Ephrem was not consistent in his use of anthropological terminology. In some instances, he emphasized the heart as the place where humans come face to face with God, while, in other instances, he pointed to the soul.[248] On occasion, he also referred to the human faculty illuminated by the glory of Divinity as the mind or intellective spirit.[249]

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[248] Edmund Beck, *Ephräms des Syrers: Psychologie und Erkenntnislehre,* CSCO (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1980), p. 15.

[249] McGuckin (1999), p. 97. Indications of Ephrem's teaching on the mind as the place of the divine-human encounter can be found, for in-

On the one hand, this tendency to be inconsistent in his use of terminology reinforces the idea that Ephrem, as an adherent of symbolic theology, never took to literalism and definitions.[250] He preferred a theological vision that was dynamic and, like the experience of God itself, ever changing. On the other hand, Ephrem's tendency to draw on anthropological terminology other than that of Scripture suggests that the fourth century theologian, while deeply indebted to Christianity's Semitic heritage, was not unaware of its Hellenic legacy. Although the Syrian tradition came under the influence of Greek thought forms primarily from the fifth century onwards, Ephrem was not wholly beyond the reach of this influence.[251] Like all early Christian theologians, he articulated his ascetical doctrine along a continuum, ranging from distinctly Semitic to distinctly Hellenic modes of expression. If his interchangeable use of anthropological vocabulary suggests anything, it suggests the fluid nature of ancient mystical thought. It indicates that theologians rarely committed to an extreme position and that the categorization of their teaching into distinct schools of thought may, ultimately, be misleading.

The next early Christian author who we will be considering is Pseudo-Macarius, a prominent fourth century ascetic who is commonly viewed as the foremost representative of the Syrian mystical tradition. Yet before we do so and as a means of deepening our understanding of the interior liturgical celebration and its inherently relational character, it is of interest to cast a glance at a number of later Syrian theologians and inquire if they, like Aphrahat, envisioned inner prayer in terms of a spiritual Eucharistic assembly. If we do so and extrapolate their views on interiority and its association with the community of the church, we will be able to lend greater weight to the argument that the mystical life, while deeply

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stance, in Ephrem, *Faith* 20.1, 5, in Brock (1987), pp. 34-35; see also Ephrem, *Epiphany* 8.22, in Schaff (1956), p. 278.

[250] Brock (1992), pp. 23-24.

[251] Brock (1987), p. xii. Brock points out that this influence, however, never influenced the deep structure of his thought.

contemplative in nature, is nevertheless embedded within a social context.

We have already seen that commitment to the reconceptualization of the temple motif propelled Aphrahat to describe prayer in terms of an internal sacrifice which is offered in the pure heart, the new Christian temple. We have also seen that the Persian sage reinforced this liturgical interpretation of prayer by proposing that the spiritual sacrifice, if acceptable to God, will be consumed by divine fire, a motif he linked implicitly to the consecratory role of the Holy Spirit.

Strongly reminiscent of this teaching is the ascetical doctrine presented in the *Liber Graduum,* or *Book of Steps*, which consists of thirty homilies and deals specifically with the more advanced stages of Christian life. Like the writings of Aphrahat, it is representative of Persian Christianity.[252] It highlights the idea that spiritual progress allows Christians to transform their bodies into divine temples and their hearts into spiritual altars. In the heart, the heavenly church is made manifest. This inner dimension is the locale around which the hidden church assembles to offer its sacrifice of thanksgiving. The following citation from the seventh *Discourse,* which deals specifically with the hidden and the manifest church, provides much insight into the author's point of view. After an opening reference to the hidden prayer of the heart as the continuous pondering on the Lord, the author resumes his discussion in the following manner:

> Since we also know that the body is become a hidden temple and the heart a hidden altar for ministry in the spirit, we should show our eagerness at this visible temple, so that, as we labour in these, we may have rest for ever in that church in heaven which is free and magnificent, and at that altar which is adorned and exalted in the spirit, before which the angels and all the saints minister, while Jesus acts as priest and effects sanctification before them, above them, and on every side of them. . . . [O]nce we have attainted to humility and have shown honour to everyone, great and small, the heavenly

[252] Brock (1987), p. 42.

> church and the spiritual altar will be revealed to us, and on the altar we shall make a sacrifice of thanksgiving in the prayer of our hearts and in the supplication of our bodies, believing all the time in this visible altar, and assured in this priesthood ministering there.[253]

In the above citation, we can detect many teachings with which we are now familiar. The heart is the place from which Christians offer their prayers; it is the sacred space where humans encounter Deity. Here, the saints and angels minister to God. At the spiritual altar—unlike Aphrahat, the author refers to the heart specifically as an inner altar—all beings are unified by the sanctifying grace of the Lord. Christians who are kind, upright, and peace-loving transcend human boundaries and become members of the heavenly community.

The author of the *Liber Graduum* emphasizes the relational context of the interior liturgical celebration in various instances. If Christians wish to participate in the angelic liturgy, they are encouraged to conduct themselves in a humble and respectful manner. They are advised to cultivate interpersonal dialogue by participating in the visible church. Christians who assemble around the spiritual altar believe in the visible altar. Reminiscent of Aphrahat, the author of the *Book of Steps* does not conceive of inner prayer and the quest for God as a solitary endeavor. His frame of reference is the manifest church and its Eucharistic assembly. Members of this assembly join the heavenly church by strengthening all who are sick and by comforting those in need.[254] The community of the manifest church anticipates the unity and justice of the hidden church.[255]

The author of the *Liber Graduum* does not dwell on the motif of fire to highlight further the liturgical nature of inner prayer. While he makes use of this image and associates it with the

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[253] *LG* 7.1-2, in Brock (1987), pp. 46-48.

[254] *LG* 7.3, in Brock (1987), p. 49.

[255] *LG* 7.4, in Brock (1987), p. 49. For a discussion of the *Book of Steps* and its author's emphasis on the communal setting of Christian life, see Brown (1988), p. 334.

Spirit,[256] he does not establish an explicit connection between fire and the celebration of the interior liturgy. If we wish to trace this association, we have to turn our attention to Martyrius, also known by his Syriac name Sahdona, a monk who wrote in the first half of the seventh century. Martyrius incorporated into his mystical doctrine many teachings found in the writings of earlier Syrian ascetics. In accordance with the doctrine of his predecessors, the seventh century monk established the need for purity of heart and the importance of leading a life of charity. Martyrius viewed the heart as an interior altar from which the faithful offer their pure sacrifice of prayer.[257] He further suggested that pure prayer, if acceptable, is consumed by God's devouring fire, a teaching that, as we have seen, evokes the descent of the Spirit at the epiclesis and deepens the Eucharistic reading of inner prayer.[258] Martyrius establishes a direct link between these elements in the following passage which touches on many prominent themes of his ascetical doctrine:

> So, if the commencement of our prayer is wakeful and attentive, and we wet our cheeks with tears stemming from the emotion of our heart, then our prayer will be made perfect, in accordance with God's wish, being without blemish, it will be accepted in his presence, and the Lord will be pleased with us and have delight in our offering. As he perceives the pleasing scent of our heart's pure fragrance, He will send the fire of the Spirit to consume our sacrifices . . . . our hearts will be given spiritual joy, along with hidden mysteries which I am unable to disclose in words to the simple. In this way we make our bodies a living holy and acceptable sacrifice, one that pleases God in our rational service.[259]

Martyrius' emphasis in this citation on the need for a pure, attentive heart from which to offer silent prayer and on the inherent connection of fire and the Holy Spirit as it descends onto the interior offering establishes his commitment to the interiorization of

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[256] *LG* 7.4, in Brock (1987), p. 50.
[257] Brock (2006), pp. 240-242.
[258] Brock (1987), pp. 199-200.
[259] Martyrius, *BP* 8.20, in Brock (1987), pp. 210-211.

the biblical temple motif. His interest in this motif is suggested further by the reference to hidden mysteries which are revealed in the heart and which Martyrius is unable to disclose. In a later passage, we learn that the author, like Aphrahat, is referring specifically to the angelic liturgy in which the faithful are permitted to participate:

> In the boundlessness of his Being he is everything, for he is not far away from each one of us, for in him we live and move and have our being; and while he is in us and in everything, he exists in the majestic glory of his divinity and in his utter exaltedness. His creation is full of the splendour of his glory: the seraphs of fire stand there to honour him, the ranks of the many-eyed cherubim escort His majesty Being, the bands of spiritual powers dash around ministering to him, the throngs of angels fly hither and thither with their wings, and all the orders of spiritual beings serve his Being in awe, crying 'Holy' in trembling and love, as they cover their faces with their wings at the splendour of his great and fearful radiance, ceaselessly crying out to one another the threefold sanctification of his exalted glory, saying 'Holy, holy, holy, Lord Almighty, with whose glories both heaven and earth are full.[260]

The above description bears great resemblance to Aphrahat's account cited earlier in this chapter. Like his predecessor, Martyrius envisions the heart as a sacred space where members of the earthly church are granted access to the joys of the heavenly church. Here, temporal barriers cease to exist. Close relations with God and the angels become a distinct possibility.

For Martyrius, as for Aphrahat, the interior liturgical celebration is inherently relational. On the one hand, it allows for the deepening of divine-human relations. But it also fosters human-to-human contact, as Christians cannot hope to regain a measure of Adam's original angelic state unless they overcome self-interest, separation, and discord.[261] By insisting that the quest for perfection is a communal venture which takes as its model the eschatological messianic assembly, Martyrius upholds the idea so prevalent in the

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[260] Martyrius, *BP* 8:6-7, in Brock (1987), pp. 204-205.

[261] Brown (1988), pp. 334-335.

Syrian Christian tradition, that the community of the church foreshadows the heavenly community. In this respect, Martyrius' doctrine of inner prayer is as invested in the relational dimension of the mystical life as earlier teachings were. While prayer of the heart allows for very intimate, personal relations with God, the deepening of these relations hinges on the Christian's ability to look outward, toward fellow beings, and to foster peaceful, caring relations.

It is now of interest to turn our attention to the late seventh century and to the work of Isaac of Nineveh, an influential mystical writer who continued the tradition of referring to the heart as an interior altar from which Christians offer their pure prayer. As we do so, we will consider further the proposition that a life of inner prayer, while deeply contemplative, is nevertheless rooted in the social network of the church. We will also give thought to Isaac's views on human embodiment.

Like earlier ascetics of the Syrian church, Isaac paid close attention to biblical anthropological teaching and made ample use of its heart language. However, having been exposed to the writings of the Greek fathers which, by the seventh century, had been translated into Syriac, he simultaneously drew on Christianity's Hellenic heritage, in particular on the Evagrian idea of the ascent of the *nous* into imageless prayer, to articulate his mystical teaching. Hence, he formulated a doctrine that combines Greek concepts with the biblically rooted Syrian doctrine of the pure heart.[262]

Isaac presents two prominent aspects of his teachings, i.e. the notion that only pure prayer is acceptable to God and the concept of the heart as the Lord's altar, in the following passage:

> Prayer's purity or lack of purity consists in the following. If, at the times when the mind invites one of these stirrings we have specified to offer a sacrifice, it mingles in this sacrifice some alien thought or distraction, then it is called impure, seeing that it has placed on the Lord's altar—that is, the heart, the spiritual pillar—one of the animals that is not permitted.[263]

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[262] McGuckin (1999), p. 98.

[263] Isaac of Nineveh, *Disc* 22 (part II), in Brock (1987), p. 256.

The idea of the heart as an interior altar, which, in itself, suggests a liturgical reading of inner prayer, is reinforced in a subsequent passage in which Isaac relates prayer explicitly to the Eucharist and to the descent of the Spirit onto the elements:

> But it is particularly at the time of prayer that the gaze is fixed upon God, and the entire momentum of its movement is stretched out toward him, as it offers to him supplications from the heart with an impelling and fervent intensity. For this reason it is appropriate that divine grace should spring up just at the moment when a single thought occupies the soul. For we can see the same thing with the gift of the Spirit upon the visible Offering we make. When everyone is standing in prayer in readiness, making earnest supplication, with the intellect concentrated on God, it is then that the Spirit descends upon the Bread and Wine that are laid upon the altar.[264]

Once again, we are in the presence of an early Christian who pays close attention to the reinterpretation of the temple motif. Taking the public celebration of the Eucharist as his frame of reference, Isaac interiorizes this event and situates it in the human heart. Like the Eucharist, genuine inner prayer allows the faithful to become members of the heavenly church and to touch upon eternal life in the here and now. Isaac deepens his spiritual interpretation of the temple motif in a subsequent passage in which he provides his audience not only with a description of the Old Testament temple but proceeds to liken the saint's entry into the heart at the time of prayer to the entrance of the high priest into the inner

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[264] Isaac of Nineveh, *Disc* 22 (part II), in Brock (1987), p. 261. Isaac's reference in the above words to the intellect's rather than the heart's concentration on God need not perplex us, if we bear in mind that he points to the mind as one of the heart's inner senses. See, for instance, Isaac's *Hom* 3 in which he suggests that "purity of mind is one thing and purity of heart is another, just as a limb differs from the whole body;" in *Isaac of Nineveh: Ascetical Homilies*, trans. Fr. Mamas (David Miller) of the Holy Transfiguration Monastery (Boston, MA: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1984), p. 21. For a discussion of the feature see McGuckin (1999), p. 99. This conception of the mind also explains Isaac's alternate use of the expressions "humility of mind" and "humility of heart."

sanctuary.[265] High priest and practitioner of inner prayer alike are permitted to witness divine, ineffable mysteries. On both occasions, humans gain direct access to God.

While Isaac does not associate fire directly with the Eucharistic celebration around the altar of the heart, the motif is not absent from his writings. Two instances in which he employs the image are of particular interest within the present context:

> Many of the early Fathers . . . did not even know the psalms, yet their prayer ascended to God like fire, as a result of their excellent ways and the humility of mind which they had acquired.[266]

> The love of God is fiery by nature and when it descends in an extraordinary degree on to a person it throws that soul into ecstasy. And so, the heart of the person who has experienced this love cannot contain it or endure it without unusual changes being seen . . . the face becomes lit up, full of joy; the body becomes heated; fear and shame depart from such a person who thus becomes like an ecstatic.[267]

The first of the above citations is of interest for noting the superior conduct of the early fathers and the resultant power of their prayers. Their hearts and, hence, their prayers are so pure as to allow for the fiery ascent of the spiritual offering into the presence of God. Given the impact of their sacrifice, we may wonder what some of the "excellent ways" which single them out may have been. Did they heed the advice of earlier Syrian writers and commit to love in action? Did they seek to emulate the equality of the heavenly realm by overcoming human strife? Isaac suggests as much in the following words:

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[265] Isaac of Nineveh, *Disc* 22 (part II), in Brock (1987), p. 261.

[266] Isaac of Nineveh, *Texts On Prayer And Outward Posture During Prayer* 19, in Brock (1987), p. 290.

[267] Isaac of Nineveh, *Hom* 35, in Mamas (1984), p. 158.

> Let this be for you a luminous sign that your soul has reached limpid[268] purity: when after thoroughly testing yourself, you find that you are full of mercy for all humankind, and that your heart is afflicted by the intensity of your pity for people, and burns like a fire, without making distinctions between people.[269]

Guided by the teaching of his predecessors, Isaac emphasizes the importance of caring relations. God accepts the sacrifice of pure prayer, because Christians adopt an attitude of mercy and love. This attitude reflects the conduct of the angels and allows the faithful to approximate their original state of glory. The more they purify their hearts, that is, the greater their commitment to the cultivation of peaceful, charitable relations, the more they become aware of God's all-pervasive presence and of the Heavenly Kingdom that abides within them:

> Behold, heaven is within you (if you are indeed pure) and within it you will see the angels in their light and their Master with them, and in them.[270]

If we now turn our attention to the second of the above citations, we can establish that the sacrifice of pure prayer changes not only relations with fellow humans, the angels, and God, but that it also has a lasting impact on the body. As suggested by Isaac's words on the fiery nature of God's love and on the many physical changes it procures in humans, such as the lighting up of the face, the pouring in of joy, the generation of heat, and the disappearance of fear and shame, divine love manifests itself vividly on a physical level. The revelation of God in the heart is a deeply felt experience

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[268] The concept of limpidity is closely related to the notion of purity. While some authors refer to purity of heart, other writers may employ the term *shafyūtā lebbā*, that is, "limpidity, lucidity, luminosity, clarity, purity, transparency, serenity, or sincerity of heart." Brock points out that no single English word does justice to the connotations of the Syriac expression; see Brock (1987), p. xxviii.

[269] Isaac of Nineveh, *Hom* 3 (of Appendix), in Mamas (1984), p. 392.

[270] Isaac of Nineveh, *Hom* 15, in Mamas (1984), p. 84.

which Isaac describes as an "inevitable sensation."[271] Through physical awareness, humans perceive the inner workings of divine grace and experience God's presence in a tangible way.

Isaac's emphasis on the importance of the body as an instrument of divine apprehension calls to mind the teaching of his fourth century predecessor Ephrem. Isaac agrees with Ephrem that the discernment of God depends on embodiment. Without the body, humans are unable to feel the movement of Divinity taking possession of the human heart. Both Syrian fathers agree that withdrawal into the secret chamber of the heart and the silent conversing with God never call for the spiritualization of human nature at the expense of embodied existence.

Having ventured into the seventh century so as to trace and explore more fully the degree to which the interiorization of the biblical temple motif shaped the Syrian doctrine of inner prayer, we are now in a better position to establish the commitment of Oriental Christians to the idea that the spiritual glorification of God is less a matter of shutting out the world but rather, and perhaps paradoxically so, of engaging in it more fully. While periods of protracted silence and withdrawal into the inner self formed the core of the quest for God, many Syrian ascetics regarded active involvement in the Christian community as no less vital to spiritual advancement. Deeds of goodwill were quintessential means of attaining perfection. Social philanthropy and inner prayer were two sides of the same coin.

In our exploration of prominent early Syrian fathers, we have also had occasion to witness their regard for the body. For Ephrem and Isaac in particular, the body was an important tool of mystical ascent. The body allowed Christians to follow the teaching of the heavenly *Īhīdāyā* and to imitate his many charitable deeds. Embodied existence enabled them to be available to the world, to establish meaningful relationships, and, by doing so, to invite greater intimacy with God. The soul's loyal companion was also essential in revealing the inner, tangible presence of God. Ephrem and Isaac agreed that it was through the body and its somatic awareness that

[271] Isaac of Nineveh, *Hom* 68, in Mamas (1984), pp. 332-333.

the Ineffable could be known despite the limitations of the human mind.

If later Syrian ascetics benefited from the teaching of their fourth century predecessors, so can we. Given the body- and community-centered approach of this ancient teaching, it may well speak to modern seekers who hope to focus on the intuitive wisdom of the body as a means of rediscovering the divine source of their being. The holistic approach of the prayer of the heart is ideally suited to address the concerns and spiritual needs of a generation that embraces a worldview, according to which a macrocosmic movement of energy connects all created things,[272] not least body and soul, the individual and the community. These prominent features of early Christian ascetical thought offer guidance to contemporary pilgrims who seek participatory knowledge of God by paying close attention to expressions of divine life in themselves, in their neighbors, and in the world at large.

With the above comments in mind, we can now retrace our steps and return to the late fourth century where we encounter one further theologian who exerted a lasting influence on the ancient doctrine of inner prayer. Let us turn to the writings of Pseudo-Macarius and examine the degree to which this early Christian writer relied on biblical anthropology, its heart language, and its temple imagery to provide posterity with a teaching that focuses on the immediate apprehension of Divinity in the materially-rooted consciousness. As we do so, we will have the opportunity to consider the liturgical conception of his doctrine of inner prayer. We will also be able to examine the ways in which Macarius advanced the incarnational spirit of Syrian theology by pointing to the body as a means of imitating Christ and of transcending discord by fostering caring interpersonal relationships.

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[272] Lynne McTaggart, *The Field: The Quest for the Secret Force of the Universe* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), p. 134.

MACARIUS

The author of the Macarian corpus is a mysterious figure. While scholars are fairly certain that he wrote in the latter half of the fourth century and that his œuvre includes the traditional *Fifty Spiritual Homilies*, a number of additional homilies, various sayings, and several letters—including the *Great Letter*,[273] they continue to puzzle over his identity. The difficulty of establishing the author of these texts has to be seen primarily in the fact that a number of noted figures by the name of Macarius wrote in the fourth century. The writer of the collection could have been Macarius Magnes (c. 400), the bishop of Magnesia who authored a five-volume work called the *Apocriticus*.[274] Then again, he could have been the great desert father Macarius of Alexandria (c. 295-394), who served the monastic communities of Kellia. Some scholars have identified the author as a Messalian by the name of Symeon of Mesopotamia to whom various Macarian manuscripts attribute authorship.[275] However, the most likely explanation is that the set of texts was relocated under the name of Macarius of Egypt (c. 300-390), the renowned founder and spiritual director of the monastic colonies in the desert of Scetis, a relocation that contemporary ascetics must have deemed necessary if the practical teachings presented in these texts were to be protected from growing criticism of their presumably heretical nature.[276]

This brings us to a further matter of much scholarly debate. Just how closely associated was the author of the Macarian corpus with the Messalian movement, a heretical sect of Syrian origin condemned by the Council of Ephesus I (431) for certain excesses in

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[273] For a detailed discussion of the Macarian manuscripts and their history, see Maloney (1992), p. 4; Plested (2004), pp. 9-12.

[274] See Maloney (1992), p. 6.

[275] Hermann Dörries, *Symeon von Mesopotamien. Die Ueberlieferung der Messalianischen Makarios-Schriften* (Berlin; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1941).

[276] It is highly unlikely that Macarius of Egypt was the author of these texts, as they stem from a Syrian rather than an Egyptian background. Furthermore, the renowned desert father was not prolific enough as a writer to account for so extensive a corpus; see Maloney (1992), p. 6; Plested (2004), p. 13.

its ascetical doctrine and for the claim that the sacramental ordinances of the church alone did not suffice to sustain Christian life but had to be complemented by experiential prayer?[277] Given the close relationship between the *Asketikon* of the Messalians and the Macarian writings, some scholars have argued that the author of these writings was a Messalian.[278] Other researchers believe that he was an anti-Messalian who drew on common ascetical ideas of his time while moderating excessive tendencies.[279] Although the latter interpretation is more plausible and continues to gain in support, evidence regarding the author's Messalian affiliation remains inconclusive. Matters are further complicated by the fact that the label "Messalian" describes not one specific school of thought but covers a variety of ancient Syrian ascetical groups which, while sharing an emphasis on religious experience, appear to have differed in their teaching on the sacraments, on ecclesiastical structures, and on hierarchical authority.[280]

Yet despite these complications, it is now generally acknowledged that Macarius-Symeon, or Pseudo-Macarius, as the author is commonly named, was at home in a Syrian rather than an Egyptian

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[277] The term "Messalian" derives from the Syriac verb *sl'* which, in the pa'el conjugation (*sallî*), can mean "to pray," and, hence, designates "those who pray." For a detailed study of the Messalian-Macarian connection, see Columba Stewart, *Working the Earth of the Heart: The Messalian Controversy in History, Texts, and Language to AD 431* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

[278] In 1920, Villecourt pointed to pronounced similarities between themes presented in the *Asketikon* and the Macarian corpus. Thereafter, it was generally accepted that Macarius was a Messalian; see P. L. Villecourt, "La date et l'origine des 'Homélies Spirituelles' attribuées à Macaire," *Comptes rendus de l'Academie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (Paris: Auguste Picard, 1920), pp. 250-258.

[279] J. Meyendorff, "Messalianism or Anti-Messalianism? A Fresh Look at the 'Macarian' Problem," in *Kyriakon*, Festschrift in Honor of Johannes Quasten (Münster: Aschendorff, 1970), vol. 2, pp. 585-590. Within this context, it is of interest to note that Dörries, who situates the author of the texts within a Messalian milieu in his earlier work, does not maintain this position in his later work; see Hermann Dörries, *Die Theologie des Makarios/Symeon* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978).

[280] Stewart (1991), p. 235.

milieu. Based on internal evidence and on the observation that the corpus bears the mark of Syrian Christian literature—recent findings indicate, for instance, familiarity with certain apocrypha of Syrian origin, most notably the Acts and the Gospel of Thomas, Pseudo-Macarius is assumed to have been an ascetic who lived in northeast Syria.[281] Further proof of the author's Oriental Christian background is provided by his scriptural writings which call to mind, among others, the *Diatessaron*, the standard text of the Gospels used in Syriac-speaking churches down to the fifth century.[282] The extensive use of symbolic language and heart imagery which is characteristic of many Macarian homilies and which invites comparison with the writings of Aphrahat and Ephrem further suggests Syrian roots.

Having said this, Macarius[283] was no stranger to the Hellenic Christian tradition. He wrote Greek easily and correctly. Since his œuvre reveals familiarity with the workings of an imperial palace, the structures of civil administration, as well as the Roman educational system and its law, he is assumed to have been a citizen of Rome.[284] It is also notable that aspects of his thought are reminiscent of the Alexandrian theological tradition and suggest a Platonic influence, a feature we will address more fully toward the end of this section.

To begin the discussion of Macarius' contributions to the prayer of the heart tradition, it is helpful to take a closer look at his anthropological teaching. Like his Syrian predecessors, Macarius was deeply committed to biblical anthropology and to the unique position it accords to the heart. Time and again, his writings bear witness to the idea that the heart is the focal point of human existence. For Macarius, as for Aphrahat and Ephrem, the heart's long-

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[281] Maloney (1992), p. 7.

[282] For more details on this matter, including geographical references that situate the author within northeast Syria, see Maloney (1992), pp. 7-8; Plested (2004), pp. 12-16.

[283] Henceforth, the "pseudo" which was introduced to indicate the pseudonymous way in which the writings were preserved will be omitted.

[284] Plested (2004), p. 15.

ings, intentions, and perceptions dictate our entire existence; the heart defines who we truly are:

> For it says: "Where your heart is, there also is your treasure" (Mt 6:21; Lk 12:34). For to whatever thing one's heart is tied and where his desire draws him, that is his God. If the heart always desires God, he is Lord of his heart.[285]

Following biblical teaching, Macarius views the heart as the locus of self-transcendence. Like an opening in the firmament through which sparklings of supernatural light may be glimpsed,[286] the heart provides an opening through which divine grace pours into a person. It is the place where the material and the immaterial, the created and the uncreated converge. It is the meeting-ground between God and the individual.[287]

If the heart provides access to God, it also brings seekers into direct contact with evil. Macarius is insistent on this point. While it is by way of the heart that grace pours into humans and permeates their entire being, it is also by way of the heart that sin takes hold of our inner selves and infiltrates all members of the body.[288] For Macarius, the heart is simultaneously home to justice and injustice, life and death, grace and sin.[289] Here, God and Satan co-exist:

> And the heart itself is but a small vessel, yet there also are dragons and there are lions; there are poisonous beasts and all the treasures of evil. And there are rough and uneven roads; there are precipices. But there is also God, also the angels, the life and the kingdom, the light and the Apostles, the treasures of grace—there are all things.[290]

Macarius presents the heart as an apocalyptic arena where the cosmic struggle between good and evil is played out on an interior

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[285] Macarius, *Hom* II.43.3, in Maloney (1992), p. 220.

[286] Jean Borella, *The Secret of the Christian Way* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 110.

[287] Kallistos Ware, "Preface," in Maloney (1992), p. xvi.

[288] Macarius, *Hom* II.15.21, in Maloney (1992), p. 116.

[289] Ware, "Preface," in Maloney (1992), pp. xv-xvi.

[290] Macarius, *Hom* II.43.7, in Maloney (1992), p. 222.

landscape.[291] If Christians wish to free their deepest selves from the many impurities to which the persistent onslaught of demonic forces gives rise, they have to take up arms and engage in continuous spiritual warfare. Like athletes or combatants,[292] they are called upon to be ever-vigilant and to guard the heart against defilement; they have to "run the race in the arena of this world with alertness and exactitude."[293] Most importantly, Christians have to pray without ceasing, loving "the Lord, not only when he enters into the place of prayer, but in walking and talking and eating."[294]

Macarius proposes that prayer is the beginning of every good endeavor and a major weapon in the battle against evil. It is an inner offering by means of which worthy Christians beseech God to be released from the deceits of the world and to be filled with the Holy Spirit.[295] Concentrated interior prayer allows them to open themselves to the presence of Divinity and its instruction:

> We ought to pray, not according to any bodily habit nor with a habit of loud noise out of a custom of silence or on bended knees. But we ought soberly to have an attentive mind,[296] waiting expectantly on God until he comes and visits the soul by means of all of its openings and its paths and senses. And so we should be silent when we ought, and to pray with a cry. . . . And thus he will enlighten, teaching one how to ask, giving pure prayer that is spiritual and worthy of God and bestowing the gift of worship "in spirit and in truth" (Jn 4:24).[297]

In his teaching on inner prayer, Macarius pays close attention to the workings of the Spirit in the heart. We pray, because we "seek to receive the true, heavenly bread to strengthen our souls, and heavenly garments of light and the spiritual shoes of the

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[291] Golitzin (1999b), p. 125; McGuckin (1999), p. 94.

[292] For Macarius' use of this imagery see, for instance, *Hom* II.26.12, in Maloney (1992), p. 168.

[293] Macarius, *Hom* II.4, in Maloney (1992), p. 50.

[294] Macarius, *Hom* II.43.3, in Maloney (1992), p. 220.

[295] Macarius, *Hom* II.37.7, in Maloney (1992), p. 209.

[296] As we will discuss shortly, Macarius places the mind within the heart.

[297] Macarius, *Hom* II.33.1-2, in Maloney (1992), p. 201.

Spirit."[298] Guided by his understanding that the battle against evil depends on the interplay of human effort and divine grace, Macarius conceives of the Holy Spirit as a heavenly lamp or a shining Sun of justice which illuminates the heart of the faithful.[299] While the Holy Spirit is received by all Christians in baptism, it shines more brightly in individuals who are progressing along the path of virtue.[300] In them, the Spirit enkindles the light of the Godhead in much the same way in which it once set on fire the heart of Christ, illuminating his humanity.[301] The Holy Spirit pierces the individual with a desire for Christ and a longing to enjoy God more fully.

If Macarius presents an ascetical doctrine that pays close attention to the inner workings of the Holy Spirit, he is equally committed to a Christocentric outlook.[302] For him, the incarnation irrevocably altered the human condition. With the Christ event, the heart ceased to be the sole domain of evil and was introduced to life, light, and the treasures of grace:[303]

> Just as the farmer, when he girds himself to cultivate the soil, must take the tools and clothing for cultivation, so Christ the King, the heavenly and true cultivator, when he came to humanity made barren by evil, put on the body and carried the cross as his tool and worked the barren soul and removed from it the thorns and thistles of evil spirits and pulled up the weeds of sin and burned up with fire every weed of its sins. And in this way he cultivated it with the wood of the cross and planted in it the most beautiful paradise of the Spirit, bearing every fruit that is sweet and delectable to God as its owner.[304]

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[298] Macarius, *Hom* III.16.7-8, in *Neue Homilien des Makarius/Symeon,* ed. Erich Kostermann and Heinz Berthold (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1961), cited in Tugwell (1985), p. 52.

[299] Macarius, *Hom* II.11.3-4, in Maloney (1992), pp. 91-92.

[300] Tugwell (1985), p. 48.

[301] Macarius, *Hom* II.43.2, in Maloney (1992), p. 219.

[302] Plested (2004), p. 43.

[303] Macarius, *Hom* II.43.7, in Maloney (1992), p. 222.

[304] Macarius, *Hom* II.28.3, in Maloney (1992), p. 185.

According to Macarius, the incarnation is the supreme act of grace. It is the highpoint of human history through which Divinity revealed itself and redeemed humankind in the person of Jesus Christ.[305] By becoming enfleshed, Christ paved the way for our sanctification and participation in divine nature. He "came and suffered the ignominy of the cross and endured death . . . so that he might beget from himself and his very own nature children of the Spirit."[306] Macarius conceives of our deification primarily in terms of light:[307]

> That the souls of the just become heavenly light, the Lord himself has told his Apostles: "You are the light of the world" (Mt 5:14). For he himself, who first transformed them into light, has ordered and commanded them to be light to the world.[308]

The idea that the worthy undergo a light-filled transformation and reflect the glory of Divinity is at the center of Macarius' ascetical teaching and exerted a lasting influence on subsequent theologians, including Maximus the Confessor, Symeon the New Theologian, and the fourteenth-century hesychasts.[309] We will consider his theology of divine light more closely in due course. However, before we do so, let us note some concluding remarks on his anthropological teaching.

As suggested above, Macarius' work is indebted, first and foremost, to the biblically rooted Syrian doctrine of the pure heart which views the latter as the symbol of our personal unity. Given this holistic outlook, there is little room in Macarius' doctrine for dichotomous thinking. Heart and mind are not antithetical. On the contrary, the theologian proposes that humans think with the heart: "For there, in the heart, the mind abides as well as all the thoughts of the soul and all its hopes. This is how grace penetrates through-

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[305] Maloney (1992), pp. 19-20.
[306] Macarius, *Hom* II.30.2, in Maloney (1992), p. 190.
[307] Louth (1981), pp. 122-123.
[308] Macarius, *Hom* II.1.4, in Maloney (1992), p. 39.
[309] Plested (2004), p. 222.

out all parts of the body."[310] The heart governs the entire organism, because it bears within itself the *nous,* the mind, its constant source of guidance and a captain who "tests the thoughts that accuse and defend."[311] The following passage elucidates Macarius' understanding of the mind. In it, he portrays the *nous* as the eye of the heart:[312]

> There is the example of the eye, little in comparison to all the members of the body and the pupil itself is small, yet it is a great vessel. For it sees in one flash the sky, stars, sun, moon, cities, and other creatures. Likewise, these things are seen in one flash, they are formed and imaged in the small pupil of the eye. So it is with the mind toward the heart.[313]

Although Macarius carefully defines the terms intellect and heart and has a clear sense of their relationship, he distinguishes between them only occasionally and, more often, uses the two terms interchangeably. In some instances, he may also employ the word *psyche*, soul, to designate the deepest aspect of human existence, using it as yet another equivalent of *kardia.*

Like his explication of *nous* and *kardia*, Macarius' definition of *psyche* is carefully thought through, even if he does not apply the concept in a consistent manner. Macarius conceives of the soul in terms of its four ruling faculties, the will, the conscience, the intellect, and the capacity to love. These faculties, he suggests, direct the soul; in them, God resides.[314] The compatibility of *nous*, *kardia*, and *psyche* is illustrated in the following words:

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[310] Macarius, *Hom* II.15.20, in Maloney (1992), p. 116.

[311] Macarius, *Hom* II.15.33, in Maloney (1992), p. 121.

[312] In other instances, Macarius speaks of the "eyes of the soul," a reference that invites comparison with the spiritual senses of Origen: "Indeed, Christ is hidden from the eyes of men. Only with the eyes of the soul is he truly seen, until the day of resurrection, when even the body itself will reign with the soul, which now, having attained the Kingdom of Christ, rests and is illuminated by the divine life," *Hom* II.2.5, in Maloney (1992), pp. 46-47; see also *Hom* II.1.2, in Maloney (1992), pp. 37-38.

[313] Macarius, *Hom* II.43.7, in Maloney (1992), pp. 221-222.

[314] Macarius, *Hom* II.1.3, in Maloney (1992), p. 38.

> He [the prince of evil] shakes the entire human race on the face of the earth. He tosses them about to and fro with restless thoughts. He entices the hearts (*kardias*) of people with the pleasures of the world. He fills every soul (*psychen*) with a dark ignorance, blindness, and forgetfulness. Only those escape him who have been reborn from above and have been transported in mind (*nou*) and heart to another world, as it was said: "Our citizenship is in Heaven" (Phil 3:20).[315]

All three human faculties, then, suggest people's inherent link with the supernatural realm and their potential to enter into close communion with God. No doubt, Macarius pays special attention to the biblical notion of the heart. Nevertheless, the fact that he draws on a variety of expressions to designate a person's innermost self cautions us not to focus too much on the presumably "affective" nature of his teaching and, by doing so, to ignore his interest in all dimensions of human existence, including the intellectual. The interchangeable use of the various terms cautions us to be wary of claims proposing that the Evagrian *nous* and the Macarian *kardia* represent incompatible categories which give rise to two distinct schools of early Christian mystical thought.[316] At this point, it is worth reiterating that the division between the "affective" and the "intellective" tradition is an invention of twentieth century scholars; it is not a categorization with which early Christians were familiar.

In the hope of better understanding how Macarius helped to shape the doctrine of the prayer of the heart, we will now consider the degree to which he interiorized the biblical temple motif and linked this feature to his theology of divine light. Let us begin this discussion by restating that Macarius follows earlier Syrian writers in placing great emphasis on purity of heart. He is ever-concerned to impress upon his audience the need to heed God's laws interiorly and cites Paul's admonition to "wash your heart from any

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[315] Macarius, *Hom* II.5.3, in Maloney (1992), p. 64.
[316] Golitzin (1999b), p. 123, n. 76.

trace of a bad conscience (Heb 10:22)"[317] to state his case. Macarius is adamant that a person's observance of the law has to go deeper than that of the Pharisees and the Scribes, who, blinded in their understanding, thought it sufficient to wash only the exterior part of the vessel.[318] If Christians wish to attract the Holy Spirit and to serve as God's temple, they have to cleanse the inner vessel of the heart.[319]

Macarius' frequent use of the fire motif, especially to symbolize the Holy Spirit, likewise invites comparison with earlier Syrian writings. Bearing in mind our previous discussion of this motif, we may wonder if Macarius employs fire imagery to situate prayer within a liturgical context. Is he concerned with presenting the heart as an interior altar onto which the Spirit descends at the epiclesis to consume the pure sacrifice? Is he as committed as Aphrahat to the spiritualization of the biblical temple motif?

As we study Macarius' œuvre, we soon come to realize how great of an emphasis the author places on the interpretation of the heart as an inner space of splendor and sacredness. It is the palace (*palation*) of Christ which, if repaired and rebuilt, provides rest to the King together with his angels and spirits.[320] The pure heart is like a holy city (*polis*), ever at peace and filled with heavenly riches.[321] It is an inner temple (*naos*), a church (*ekklesia*), a throne (*thronos*), an altar (*thysiasterion*), and a tabernacle (*skene*).[322] All of these descriptions are rich in liturgical connotation and strongly suggest Macarius' intention to reconceptualize the image of the temple. For him, as for Aphrahat, the heart is the site of the inner, liturgical celebration where Christians glorify God and come face to face with Divinity. Macarius is emphatic that the glory of God, which appeared to Israel on Sinai (Ex 19, 24, 33-34), came to dwell in a special way in the sanctuary of the Jerusalem Temple (1 Kings 8), and, in Christ, came veiled in flesh, now manifests itself in the

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317 Macarius, *EM*, in Maloney (1992), p. 254.
318 Macarius, *EM*, in Maloney (1992), p. 255.
319 Macarius, *EM*, in Maloney (1992), p. 269.
320 Macarius, *Hom* II.15.33, in Maloney (1992), p. 120.
321 Macarius, *Hom* II.11.15, in Maloney (1992), p. 97.
322 Golitzin (1999b), p. 121, n. 69.

hearts of worthy Christians. Through the gift of grace, Christ's followers become places of theophany:[323]

> Moses, having been clothed in the flesh, was unable to enter into the heart and take away the sordid garments of darkness. But only spirit from Spirit and fire from Fire dissolves the power of evil darkness. Circumcision, in the shadow of the Law, shows the coming of the true circumcision of the heart. The baptism of the Law is a shadow of the true things to come. For that baptism washed the body, but here a baptism of Fire and Spirit purifies and washes clean the polluted mind. There the priest, "covered with infirmity" (Heb 5:2), entered into the Holy of Holies to offer sacrifice for himself and the people. Here the true High Priest, Christ, once and for all entered into the tabernacle, not made by hands, and the altar above, ready to purify those who beseech him and the conscience that has been sullied. For he says, "I will be with you even to the consummation of the world" (Mt 28:20).[324]

The heart is the temple of Christ, which, if cleansed by the devouring fire of the Spirit, is fit to serve as the High Priest's permanent abode. The motif of fire, which is prominent in the above citation, features also in the following passage. Again, it serves to highlight the sacramental nature of inner prayer:

> Let us, therefore, take this body and make an altar of sacrifice, and let us place on it all our desires and let us beg the Lord that he would send down from Heaven the invisible and mighty fire and consume the altar and everything on it.[325]

Macarius' debt to Old Testament accounts of sacrificial offerings and their consummation by divine fire is unmistakable. Unmistakable, too, is his wish to interiorize the sacrificial act. The disciples of Christ is the true altar and the living offering.[326] Like the

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[323] Golitzin (1999b), pp. 122-123.

[324] Macarius, *Hom* II.32.4-5, in Maloney (1992), pp. 198-199.

[325] Macarius, *Hom* II.31.5, in Maloney (1992), p. 195.

[326] Macarius, *Hom* I.52.1.1, in Alexander Golitzin, "Hierarchy Versus Anarchy?" *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (1994): 176.

high priest who enters the holy of holies, baptized Christians glorify God and invoke the descent of heavenly fire by presenting their pure selves. The Eucharistic context of Macarius' teaching is pervasive:

> Just as the fire which ministered on the altar of Jerusalem in the time of the captivity was buried in a hole, and that same fire, when peace came and the captives returned to their homeland, was, as it were, renewed and again functioned as it did before, so too . . . faithful souls receive in an interior way that divine and heavenly fire in this present life, and that fire fashions a heavenly image upon their human nature."[327]

If the use of the fire motif is one way in which Macarius reconceptualizes the Eucharistic offering, his repeated usage of the term *metabole*, "change," a term traditionally associated with the liturgical assembly and the mysterious transformation of the sacramental elements, is another means of doing so.[328] Macarius applies this expression to the transformation of a person's essential self and suggests that just as the elements are changed through the action of the Holy Spirit at the altar of the church, so the "inner man" is changed at the altar of the heart:

> The believer should beg God to be transformed in his deliberation by a change of heart, to be transformed (*metabole)* from bitterness into sweetness.[329]

Alluding to the feeding of the five thousand, a gospel narrative with marked Eucharistic undertones, Macarius again employs *metabole* to indicate a link between the change of bread and wine and the transformation of the Christian:[330]

> For he who changed (*metabalon*) the nature of five loaves into the nature of the multitude . . . is able also to change (*metabalein*) the soul that was barren and savage from sin to his own

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[327] Macarius, *Hom* II.11.1-2, in Maloney (1992), pp. 90-91.
[328] Golitzin (1999b), p. 126.
[329] Macarius, *Hom* II.31.1, in Maloney (1992), p. 194.
[330] Golitzin (1999b), p. 126.

> goodness and kindness and peace by the holy and good "Spirit of promise" (Eph 1:13).[331]

The idea that Macarius likens a person's change of heart to the consecration of the elements is particularly pronounced in his fifty-second Homily, a text in which he fully develops the theme of the inner self as a microcosm of the church, the macrocosm. He writes:

> Thus, now as well, the Spirit of God is present with the holy Church of God and the holy altar and in all the visible arrangement. Among the worthy and the faithful It acts with different gifts, while It remains far away from the unworthy. For the living activity of the Holy Spirit is to be sought from God in living hearts, because all visible things and all the [present] arrangement passes away, but hearts alive in the Spirit will abide.[332]

In this passage, the close link between the exterior altar of the church and the interior altar of the heart is apparent indeed. Similar to the public transformation of the elements, the interior celebration of the Eucharist renders the pure in heart worthy of the Lord. It releases them from the prison of darkness and allows the divine image of the soul, God's own handiwork, to shine forth. The "living activity of the Holy Spirit" transforms the upright heart into a place of radiance and splendor.[333] The inner recesses of the faithful become filled with heavenly light.

Macarius' doctrine of divine light is inseparably linked to the spiritualization of Christian worship. The descent of God's fire into the pure heart allows for the transformation of a person into a light-filled temple. Just as the first and second Temples were once illuminated by God's Shekinah, so worthy seekers receive the radiant presence of Divinity. The heart becomes the locale where the numinous immanence of God reveals itself to the world:

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[331] Macarius, *Hom* II.44.2, in Maloney (1992), p. 223.
[332] Macarius, *Hom* I.52, in Golitzin (1994), p. 177.
[333] Macarius, *Hom* II.49.5, in Maloney (1992), p. 243.

> For the soul that is deemed to be judged worthy to participate in the light of the Holy Spirit by becoming his throne and habitation, and is covered with the beauty of ineffable glory of the Spirit, becomes all light, all face, all eye. There is no part of the soul that is not full of the spiritual eyes of light. That is to say, there is no part of the soul that is covered with darkness but is totally covered with spiritual eyes of light. For the soul has no imperfect part but is in every part on all sides facing forward and covered with the beauty of the ineffable glory of the light of Christ, who mounts and rides upon the soul.[334]

Throughout his work, Macarius reiterates the idea that silent prayer offered from the inner altar introduces worthy Christians to divine life. To convey the light-exuding nature of this transformative process, he draws on Paul's words to the Corinthians (2 Cor 3:18) and the idea that the interior self of the worthy is transformed into God's image from glory to glory.[335] Christ, the good Portrait Painter, will reward his devout followers by painting "according to his own image a heavenly man. Out of his Spirit, out of the substance of the light itself, ineffable light, he paints a heavenly image and presents to it its noble and good Spouse."[336] Purified Christians are able to behold the glory of Divinity by beholding the image painted by the Lord in the heart.

Macarius deepens the discussion of his doctrine of divine light in an exposition of God's light-filled revelation to Moses on Mount Sinai, an event which, as indicated above, foreshadows the illumination of the worthy heart.[337] Reminiscent of the Shekinah, the glory of the Lord, who settled on top of Mount Sinai and manifested itself like a devouring fire in the sight of the Israelites (Ex 24:15-17), divine fire sets ablaze the individual heart. The luminous transformation of human nature is epitomized by the Lord's transfiguration on Mount Tabor. Like the body of the Son,

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[334] Macarius, *Hom* II.1.2, in Maloney (1992), p. 37.
[335] Macarius, *Hom* II.5.10, in Maloney (1992), p. 74.
[336] Macarius, *Hom* II.30.4, in Maloney (1992), p. 191.
[337] Macarius, *Hom* II.30.4, in Maloney (1992), p. 191.

> the bodies of the saints are glorified and shine like lightning. Just as the interior glory of Christ covered his body and shone completely, in the same way also in the saints the interior power of Christ in them in that day will be poured out exteriorly upon their bodies. For even now at this time they are in their minds participators of his substance and nature.[338]

Macarius' emphasis on the luminous encounter with God shaped the doctrine of the prayer of the heart to a decisive degree and was embraced by many later theologians. The Macarian theology of light proved particularly influential over the thought of the eleventh-century Byzantine monk Symeon the New Theologian who, many centuries later, wrote:

> Then as I was meditating, Master, on these things,
> suddenly You appeared from above, much greater than the sun
> and You shone brilliantly from the heavens down into my heart.[339]

The above inquiry into Macarius' views on prayer as an interiorized act of worship begs the question if he, like Aphrahat, emphasized the communal nature of the contemplative life. Aphrahat suggested that compassionate behavior was essential to such a life. It was prayer itself. Ephrem, too, considered it his Christian calling to imitate Christ's many acts of love and to alleviate the suffering of fellow beings. Does Macarius follow their lead and establish a close link between the practice of inner prayer and participation in the "fellowship of the mystery"? Does he suggest that the celebration of the interior liturgy unites the faithful in much the same way in which they are united during public worship? Is the transformation of the heart into God's throne dependent on social philanthropy? We will inquire into these questions in the upcoming pages. Once we have given thought to this aspect of Macarius' teaching, it will be of interest to consider his notion of embodi-

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[338] Macarius, *Hom* II.15.38, in Maloney (1992), p. 123.

[339] Symeon the New Theologian, *Hymns* 25, in *Symeon the New Theologian: Hymns of Divine Love*, trans. George Maloney (Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1976), p. 135.

ment, a teaching well worth exploring, especially if we recall the above cited words on the Lord's transfiguration and on the body's full participation in the luminous encounter with God.

In the attempt to clarify Macarius' views on the relational dimension of Christian existence, it is notable that the theologian, despite his emphasis on the internal glorification of God, does not call into question the importance of public worship.[340] Like Aphrahat and Ephrem, he subscribes to an ascetical doctrine that is rooted in the church. To be sure, Macarius is concerned, first and foremost, with the religious life of the individual and with an inner transformation that owes much to the diligent adherence to silent prayer. He rarely comments on the church, and expositions on the Eucharist are infrequent.[341] But when Macarius does speak of the latter, he discusses it in fully traditional terms and leaves his audience in no doubt as to the importance of the sacrament.[342] Individuals who eat of Christ's body are made worthy to become partakers of the Holy Spirit. Those who drink of the Savior's blood are sanctified.[343]

According to Macarius, commitment to the church goes hand in hand with commitment to communal involvement. The theologian warns fellow ascetics who have devoted themselves to a life of inner prayer on a full-time basis not to become so absorbed in the mystical joys of the interior life as to neglect charitable service. Even Christians who practice the silent contemplation of God are called upon to remain active members of the community, instruct-

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[340] According to Dörries, Macarius' relationship to the church was complex. He viewed the church as inherently transient and could be outright critical of its actions. At the same time, Macarius regarded it as a divine institution, the recipient of the Holy Spirit, and, as such, deserving of respect and loyalty. Dörries proposes that this ambivalent relationship does not call into question Macarius' orthodoxy but rather indicates his commitment to the church and the attempt to come to terms with its imperfections; see Dörries (1978), pp. 385-397.

[341] Dörries (1978), p. 396.

[342] Golitzin (2002), p. 141.

[343] Macarius, *Hom* I.22.1.7-8, in *Makarios/Symeon: Reden und Briefe. Die Sammlung I des Vaticanus Graecus 694 (B)*, ed. Heinz Berthold (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1973), vol. 1, p. 230.

ing and caring for fellow monastics.[344] Reminiscent of Aphrahat, Macarius refuses to see any value in prayer that is offered at the expense of a person's well-being. If praying ascetics neglect or, still worse, disdain brethren who provide for their bodily needs, they engage in devilish rather than pure prayer.[345] Macarius is emphatic. Christian life depends on humility, respect, and love. Only by basing their lives on these cornerstones and creating a mutually supportive environment can ascetical practitioners reap the benefits of their strivings:

> The brethren should conduct themselves toward one another with the greatest love, whether in praying or reading Scripture or doing any kind of work so that they may have the foundation of charity toward others. And thus their various tasks or undertakings may find approval with those who pray and those who read and those who work, all can conduct themselves toward each other in sincerity and simplicity to their mutual profit.[346]

In his insistence on compassionate, harmonious relations, Macarius looks to the angelic realm as his model:

> [Just] as the angels in heaven live together in accord with each other in the greatest unanimity, in peace and love, and there is no pride or envy there but they communicate in mutual love and sincerity, so in the same way the brethren should be among themselves.[347]

For Macarius, charitable conduct is an essential feature of the quest for God. By heeding and caring for members of the earthly church, ascetics come to participate even in this lifetime in the heavenly church. The Eucharistic community prefigures and manifests the angelic community. It portrays how God's servants conduct themselves in the Kingdom to come, a place where all strife

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[344] Dörries (1978), p. 297.

[345] Simon Tugwell, "Evagrius and Macarius," pp. 168-75, in Jones, Wainwright, and Yarnold (1986), p. 175.

[346] Macarius, *Hom* II.3.1, in Maloney (1992), p. 47.

[347] Macarius, *Hom* II.3.1, in Maloney (1992), p. 47.

and fragmentation are transcended. If humans wish to transform the heart into a temple and to participate in the heavenly glorification of Divinity, they do well to heed the church and the welfare of its members.

Having examined Macarius' commitment to the relational dimension of the ascetical life, it is now of interest to consider his views on embodiment. Does Macarius adopt a positive stance toward the body, suggesting that the mystical life bids ascetics to embrace rather than deny their embodied existence? Is he as concerned as Ephrem to show that intimacy with God depends on bodily awareness?

To answer this set of questions, it is helpful to recall the earlier exposition of Macarius' holistic anthropological viewpoint, a viewpoint that asserts the fundamental unity of body and soul. Likewise, it is helpful to remember the deeply incarnational spirit of his doctrine and to reiterate that Macarius considers the enfleshment of the Son to be the tool *par excellence* of effecting human redemption. Last but not least, let us bear in mind how close of a link the theologian establishes between Christ's glorification on Mount Tabor and the illumination of the bodies of the saints at the resurrection. Surely, the proposition that the body is transfigured along with the soul tells us much about his conception of embodiment.

Taking the last of these teachings as our starting-point, one should note that Macarius views the transfiguration as the quintessential illustration of the notion that the glory of God manifests itself in the outward body.[348] Macarius suggests that, just as Divinity revealed its radiant presence on Mount Tabor, so heavenly splendor will illuminate the resurrected body. On the last day, the severance of body and soul, which is experienced at death, will be reversed and their unity reestablished. Like the bodies of Adam and Eve which were "covered with God's glory in place of clothing"[349] before the fall and which shone with light in Paradise, so the bodies of the saints will radiate with divine light. Now the saints "possess this glory in their souls . . . but it will then cover and clothe their

[348] Plested (2004), p. 220.

[349] Macarius, *Hom* II.8.12, in Maloney (1992), p. 100.

naked bodies. It will sweep them up into Heaven and we will at last come to rest, both body and soul, with the Lord forever."[350]

The Macarian idea that the body shares in the glory of the soul and that it has a distinct place in the Kingdom of Heaven raises the question of how we can account for the austerity and dualistic tendencies that seem to inform some of the theologian's teachings. What are we to make of Macarius' suggestion that only "the person who really has rejected the world and has taken effort to cast from him the weight of this earth and has thrown off the vain passions and desires of the flesh, of glory, of authority, and of human honors"[351] can hope to conquer the forces of darkness? How can we reconcile Macarius' holistic stance with his call for strict asceticism?

Despite the severity of this teaching, it is important to note that the Macarian belief in the pervasiveness of evil and in the ongoing need for ascesis to combat God's adversaries is not rooted in metaphysical dualism. If Macarius focuses on the corruption of the heart, he does so primarily with the intention of heightening people's awareness of their current fallen state.[352] His objective is not to invoke an atmosphere of hopelessness but rather to alert his audience to the root of human predicament and to emphasize the importance of consciously choosing good over evil. Macarius does not propose a separation of the material and immaterial order. For him, the physical world is permeated with divine glory:

> You see how the glories of God are unspeakable and incomprehensible, of ineffable light and eternal mysteries and of innumerable good things. For example, in the visible things around us, it is impossible for anyone to comprehend the number of plants of the earth or of seeds or of various flowers. And it is impossible for anyone to measure all the richness of the earth. Or in the sea, it is impossible for any man to understand the living creatures in it or their number or their kinds or

[350] Macarius, *Hom* II.5.11, in Maloney (1992), p. 74.
[351] Macarius, *Hom* II.21.5, in Maloney (1992), pp. 154-155.
[352] Dörries (1978), p. 15.

> their variety or the measure of the sea's water or the measure of its extent.[353]

Like the material world, which brings us daily into contact with the mystery of God's creation and the light that suffuses it, the human body is a divine creation and inherently good.[354] If it gives rise to passions which manifest themselves in untoward actions, it is not the body that is to be held responsible for these acts but rather evil spirits that have enthroned themselves in the heart by means of distorting thoughts.[355] Once the intellect knows how to keep demonic scheming at bay and how to guard the heart, it can prevent the ignition of harmful passions. Seekers are then able to proceed along the spiritual path and to regain their natural state of health.[356] This process is characterized by the transformation of a person's entire being into God's throne. Mind and body radiate with the glory of Divinity.[357]

For Macarius, it is thus not the body that prevents communion with God but rather "passions hidden deeply in us [which] are not from our nature, but come from an outside source."[358] The body itself is permeated with grace; it participates in the sanctified state of the perfect. By way of the heart, the meeting-point between God and the individual, supernatural light penetrates every bodily limb. Macarius suggests that the inherent value of embodied existence is epitomized by the incarnation. The body served as the instrument through which Christ effected human salvation. Without assuming human flesh, he could not have carried the cross as his tool and removed from the barren soul the thorns and thistles of evil spirits. Christ could not have planted the most beautiful Paradise of the Spirit in the human heart.[359] The body is simultaneously the instrument of salvation and its object. It allows humans to imitate the life and deeds of the Lord and to work toward their deifica-

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[353] Macarius, *Hom* II.34.3, in Maloney (1992), p. 204.
[354] Macarius, *EM*, in Maloney (1992), p. 254.
[355] Macarius, *Hom* II.5.5, in Maloney (1992), p. 77.
[356] Plested (2004), p. 250.
[357] Macarius, *Hom* II.5.5, in Maloney (1992), p. 77.
[358] Macarius, *EM*, in Maloney (1992), p. 254.
[359] Macarius, *Hom* II.28.3, in Maloney (1992), p. 185.

tion. Once seekers have attained this advanced state of being, their bodies know purity, harmony, and ease.

Macarius' ascetical theology has much in common with the teachings of his Syrian predecessors. Like the doctrines of Aphrahat and Ephrem, it is steeped in biblical anthropology and its holistic conception of human nature. His positive understanding of materiality is pervasive. Pervasive, too, is Macarius' interest in the inherently relational nature of Christian existence, an interest he maintains despite his commitment to the interiorization of the temple motif.

While Macarius' debt to teachings of the Syrian tradition is pronounced, it is notable that he was a theologian who stood at the confluence of different currents of early Christian thought.[360] Macarius was influenced by a variety of teachings and articulated a doctrine that reflects the pluralistic nature of the ancient church. Although the biblical tradition of the heart dominated his discourse, he was no stranger to mystical teachings of the Alexandrian Greek milieu and incorporated elements of these teachings into his theology. A brief glance at its intellectual-immaterial elements will shed light on this aspect of the Macarian corpus.

Traces of the Hellenic Christian tradition, which was so indebted to Platonic teaching, can be detected in various instances. Macarius indicates his familiarity with this tradition, for instance, by employing the categories of type and antitype, outer and inner, visible and invisible.[361] The ancient Law, the theologian suggests, is a shadow of the New Covenant. The earthly church anticipates the heavenly church. The public celebration of the liturgy points to the celebration of the interior liturgy. For Macarius, as for Christians of ancient Alexandria, the entire visible world is a shadow or type of the eternal world. The beauty humans witness below is but a reflection of the Beauty they hope to encounter above. It is a shadow of the Supremely Beautiful:[362]

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[360] Golitzin (2002), p. 135.

[361] Dörries (1978), p. 392, n. 49; Golitzin (1994), p. 160.

[362] See, for instance, Plato, *The Symposium,* trans. Christopher Gill (London: Penguin Books, 1999), pp. 48-50.

> If, then, you believe these things to be true, as indeed they are, look to yourself to see whether your soul has found its guiding light and the genuine meat and drink which is the Lord. If you have not, seek night and day in order to receive. When you see the sun, seek the true sun. For you are blind. When you gaze on a light, look into your soul to see whether you have found the true and good light. For all the visible things of the senses are but a shadow of the true realities of the soul.[363]

Macarius further indicates his familiarity with Christianity's Greek heritage by drawing on the image of the chariot, a motif that not only calls to mind the light-filled vision of Ezekiel (1:4-2:1) but also Plato's reference in the *Phaedrus* to the chariot of the soul which is driven by its pilot, the intellect.[364] Macarius presents this image within a Christian context and suggests that the soul is the chariot which is driven by Christ, the authentic Charioteer who "is mounted on the soul and guides it with the reins of the Spirit, directing it according to his knowledge of the way."[365] If we recall our discussion of Macarius' conception of the *nous* as the captain of the heart who has the entire vehicle under his control,[366] we detect yet another variation on Plato's famous theme.

There is still further evidence to suggest Macarius' awareness of Greek philosophical thought patterns and his willingness to incorporate these into his doctrine.[367] Macarius was familiar, for instance, with the Hellenic notion of the intellect's ascent from materiality and did not hesitate to employ noetic terminology to describe the mind's longing to "co-mingle with unoriginate intellect."[368] Likewise, he was acquainted with the mutually supporting chain of virtues and with the concept of the *logismoi,* two teachings we are wont to associate with Evagrius rather than with the author

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[363] Macarius, *Hom* II.33.4, in Maloney (1992), p. 202.

[364] Plato, *Phaedrus and the Seventh and Eighth Letters,* tr. Walter Hamilton (London: Penguin Books, 1973), pp. 50-57.

[365] Macarius, *Hom* II.1.3, in Maloney (1992), pp. 38-39.

[366] Macarius, *Hom* II.15.34, in Maloney (1992), p. 121.

[367] Golitzin (2002), p. 160; Plested (2004), p. 30.

[368] Macarius, *Hom* I.3.6.1, in Berthold (1973), p. 46, cited in Plested (2004), p. 66.

of the Macarian corpus. While heir to the Syrian tradition and greatly indebted to a language abounding with liturgical and heart imagery, Macarius thus did not exclude Greek Christian elements from his theology. At home in a world in which mystical teachings were articulated along a continuum, Macarius aligned himself with the Semitic spectrum of this continuum, without, however, disregarding pertinent Hellenic doctrines.

To conclude this discussion of Macarius' ascetical thought, let us propose that his legacy is of a twofold nature. On the one hand, Macarius is remembered for the use of biblical heart language and for the ability to endow his teaching with a strong sense of God's movement to take possession of the heart.[369] His conception of one's innermost self as a liturgical site where the worthy glorify God and which, if purified, is transfigured into God's radiant temple situates his theology firmly within a Syrian milieu. Like Aphrahat and Ephrem, Macarius was much committed to the holistic conception of human nature and did not divorce the body from the process of sanctification. Like his predecessors, he also suggested that the sanctified state was attained by imitating the egalitarian and loving existence of the angelic realm. Macarius believed that contact with God depended on participation in the fellowship of the visible church. It was the means of manifesting the eschatological community in one's lifetime. Encountering Divinity within the deep recesses of the heart was intimately linked to human relatedness.

A further, though less prominent, aspect of Macarius' legacy may be seen in his ability to articulate an ascetical doctrine open to diverse, yet by no means incompatible early Christian teachings. By taking a first, small step in combining elements of the Syrian and the Hellenic Christian mystical currents, Macarius set an example to be emulated by later theologians. Unbeknownst to him, he contributed to the progressive intermarriage of both legacies and to their final joining during the Byzantine hesychast era.

We will have more to say on the synthesis of the two early Christian mystical currents in due course. Yet before we can exam-

[369] McGuckin (1999), p. 96.

ine how their synthesis allowed for the crystallization of the prayer of the heart, we must explore the Greek Christian background of this ancient practice. In order to do so, we will now turn our attention to ancient Alexandria and to the writings of Origen, one of the most prominent theologians of the early church and a chief engineer of its mystical heritage.

3 THE PRAYER OF THE HEART: ITS GREEK CHRISTIAN BACKGROUND

ORIGEN OF ALEXANDRIA

In an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the prayer of the heart, it is essential to consider the doctrine of Origen of Alexandria (c. 186-255), a theologian of the ancient church who is rightly considered to be the father of Christian mystical thought and whose teachings on anthropology, the ascetical struggle, divine contemplation, and the soul's deifying union with God influenced many subsequent theologians, most notably the Cappadocians, Evagrius of Pontus, Dionysius the Areopagite, and Maximus the Confessor. Given the extent of Origen's legacy and his lasting contributions to the ancient practice of inner prayer, it is well worth our time to consider prominent features of his ascetical teaching in greater detail.

Origen of Alexandria was the most notable biblical scholar, dogmatic theologian, and mystical writer of the early church, and, despite his posthumous condemnation by the Fifth Ecumenical Council in 553 and the ensuing attempt to destroy the Origenian body of work, his influence on Christian teaching has been immense. Many valuable scholarly works have focused on Origen the biblicist as well as Origen the philosopher-theologian much influenced by Middle Platonic thought, and it is indeed impossible to understand Origen's doctrine without paying close attention to these aspects of his legacy.[370] At the same time, it is important to

[370] For studies on Origen the biblicist, see, for instance, Hans Bietenhard, *Caesarea: Origenes und die Juden* (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer

note that the third century theologian was not a mere theoretician who limited himself to the intellectual study of Scripture and ancient philosophy. Origen was also an ascetic and priest who strove to exemplify the insights he derived from biblical exegesis and Greek metaphysics on a daily, practical basis. His teaching, while at times highly speculative, was rooted in a life of fasting, abstinence, contemplation, and active service,[371] features that endeared him to the earliest proponents of the monastic movement and established him as an exemplar of ascetic piety.[372] Especially writings conceived in Caesarea, where Origen was ordained and where he delivered countless sermons, reveal his forceful pastoral style and his desire to impress upon the local congregation the importance of living the

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GmbH, 1974); P. M. Blowers, "Origen, the Rabbis, and the Bible," in *Origen of Alexandria*, ed. Charles Kannengiesser and William L. Petersen (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), pp. 96-116; Nicholas R. M. de Lange, *Origen and the Jews: Studies in Jewish-Christian Relations in Third-Century Palestine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Karen Torjesen, *Hermeneutical Procedure and Theological Methods in Origen's Exegesis* (New York: de Gruyter, 1986); Joseph Wilson Trigg, *Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Third-Century Church* (Atlanta, GA: J. Knox, 1983). Origen's debt to Platonic teaching is discussed, among others, in Robert Berchman, *From Philo to Origen: Middle Platonism in Transition* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984); Charles Bigg, *The Christian Platonists of Alexandria* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968); Henry Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition: Studies in Justin, Clement, and Origen,* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984); Hal Koch, *Pronoia und Paideusis: Studien über Origenes und sein Verhältnis zum Platonismus*. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1979); J. C. M. Van Winden, "Le Christianisme et la philosophie. Le commencement du dialogue entre la foi et la raison," in *Kyriakon*, Festschrift in Honor of Johannes Quasten (Münster: Aschendorff, 1970), pp. 205-213.

[371] Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 6.3.9-13. As pointed out by McGuckin, although Eusebius presents this picture of Origen with the intention of linking the theologian to the ascetics of the late fourth century for whom he was writing, there is no reason to doubt the accuracy of this representation; see McGuckin (2004a), "The Life of Origen," by John A. McGuckin, p. 6, n. 38.

[372] McGuckin (2004a), v.s. "Asceticism," by Vincent L. Wimbush, p. 64; idem (2004b), v.s. "Origen," p. 243.

Christian life in an experiential manner.[373] The upcoming discussion will focus on this aspect of Origen's legacy. Yet before we can examine his impact as an ascetical teacher and spiritual guide, we do have to give some thought to Origen the Platonic thinker and biblicist.

There can be little doubt that Greek philosophy exerted a decisive influence over Origen's thought. Platonic cosmology and anthropology shaped his views on the contemplative life,[374] and Origen never affirmed sacramental materiality to quite the degree that some of his Alexandrian successors did, most notably Athanasius and Cyril.[375] Plato's doctrine of the soul's attempt to unite with the Transcendent Absolute through divine contemplation made a lasting impression on Origen, as did the Platonic understanding that the beatifying union resulted from an ascending process of purification and illumination. Indeed, even a cursory glance at Plato's famous allegory of the cave, which presents this process in terms of the soul's gradual awakening, detachment from false reality, and attachment to true reality, allows readers to detect distinct Greek echoes in Origen's own description of the soul's mystical journey.[376] Both thinkers believed that the pre-existent, divine soul had to experience a radical reorientation if it was to scale the heights of the intelligible realm and be united with its source of origin. Plato and Origen agreed that the process of returning to the supersensible realm could be accomplished only if the soul exerted the greatest possible effort and mustered all of its mental disci-

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[373] A fine example of Origen's pastoral style is featured in his *Treatise on Prayer*, which includes a section devoted to the exegesis of the Lord's Prayer. The exposition seems to have been part of a lecture series intended for catechumens of the Caesarean church who were preparing themselves for baptism; see McGuckin (2004a), "The Life of Origen," p. 17.

[374] McGuckin (2004a), v.s. "Mystical Thought," by Alan Paddle, p. 154.

[375] McGuckin (2001), pp. 28-29.

[376] Louth (1981), pp. 5-6.

pline.[377] Constant striving for perfection was essential if the soul was to know and participate in its object of contemplation, the Supremely Good and Beautiful.

But Origen's relationship to Greek philosophy was complex, and if the priest-theologian was well versed in this discipline, he was equally fluent in scriptural studies. His knowledge of the Old and New Testaments was profound, and the countless homilies, commentaries, and scholia on books of the canon of Scripture which he bequeathed to posterity reveal the extent of this learnedness. As a trained grammarian, Origen was greatly concerned with establishing the correct Greek translation of the Old Testament on which to base his interpretations. To this end, he committed to a lifelong project, the writing of the *Hexapla*, a six-column edition of the Bible featuring the Hebrew text of the Old Testament, its Greek transliteration, and the four standard Greek versions of Scripture.[378] The *Hexapla* is a milestone in biblical research and establishes Origen's lasting devotion to textual criticism and the study of the Bible.[379]

The theologian's commitment to Christianity's biblical heritage colors his mystical doctrine in many respects, and we will spend much time exploring this feature in the upcoming pages. To set the stage for this exploration, it is helpful to consider more closely two specific doctrines, the doctrine of the divine image and the doctrine of the soul's ascent, both of which Origen derived from the careful study of Scripture. Once we have examined these teachings, we can turn our attention to other Origenian expositions on the ascetical life and consider the degree to which these, too, are based on biblical lore.

To articulate his doctrine of the divine image, Origen drew on the concept of the *nous*. As was suggested in the introduction of this study, he employed the concept to describe the highest aspect

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[377] For a discussion of Plato's emphasis on the need for effort and discipline in the soul's ascent, see Copleston (1993), p. 162.

[378] McGuckin (2004a), "The Scholarly Works of Origen," by John A. McGuckin, p. 27.

[379] Trigg (1983), p. 85.

of the soul, the mind or intellect. In the *nous*' pre-fallen state, Origen believed it to have been at home in the spiritual, non-material realm, capable of perceiving and understanding God perfectly. While the *nous* lost this ability when it fell away from the contemplation of Divinity through carelessness, it nevertheless retained its kinship with the immaterial realm. It never ceases to possess within itself the means of restoration, provided it is "recalled into the image and likeness of God."[380]

While Origen's concept of the *nous* is based on Greek metaphysics,[381] the theologian effected a synthesis of this concept with the scriptural tradition by linking it to the biblical notion of the image. According to this Origenian doctrine, the *nous* is created in the image of the Logos, the Word and Image of the invisible God.[382] The Logos' image is imprinted on the *nous* at creation and insures that human beings are defined, at the deepest level, by their relationship with God. By engaging in the long process of purifying the inner image, devout Christians are able to free it from the many layers of tarnish accrued from sinfulness and to assimilate progres-

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[380] Origen, *PArch 4.4.9,* in *Origen: On First Principles*, trans. G. W. Butterworth (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973), p. 327.

[381] In his use of the concept, Origen aligned himself with the most renowned of Greek thinkers, starting out with Homer, who employed the term to indicate all mental activity. According to the pre-Socratics, *nous* referred specifically to knowledge and reason, while also describing a divine principle responsible for arranging the universe. This view was shared by Plato, who, in the *Timaeus,* identifies the *nous* with the Demiurge, the craftsman of the universe.[381] Plato went on to suggest that it also designates the rational part of the soul. Aristotle equated the *nous* that thinks itself with the Prime Mover as well as with the intellect. Middle Platonism, which provided the backdrop to Origen's philosophical teaching, for the most part continued the tradition of employing the term to denote the divine principle of the universe and of the individual soul. For a discussion of the concept, see Copleston (1993); John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists,* rev. ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

[382] Origen suggests that only the Logos is the "Image of God" in the strict sense. Souls, in turn, are "images of the Image;" see Crouzel (1989), p. 93; McGuckin (2004b), v.s. "Image of God," pp. 178-179. For a detailed discussion of Origen's teaching on the "Image of God," see Henri Crouzel, *Théologie de l'Image de Dieu chez Origène* (Paris: Aubier, 1956).

sively to the Logos, their divine model. This refashioning of the image allows them to gain in virtue and wisdom. It allows seekers to increase intimacy with the divine realm and to attain the deifying perfection of God's likeness at the height of the mystical ascent. If we consider Origen's own words on this teaching, we find that he is careful to point to Scripture as his source of inspiration:

> The highest good, towards which all rational nature is progressing, and which is also called the end of all things, is defined by very many even among philosophers in the following way, namely, that the highest good is to become as far as possible like God.[383] But this definition is not so much, I think, a discovery of their own, as something taken by them out of the divine books. For Moses, before all others, points to it when in recording the first creation of man he says, 'And God said, Let us make man in our own image and likeness' (Gen. 1:26). Then he adds afterwards, 'And God made man; in the image of God made he him; male and female made he them, and he blessed them' (Gen. 1:27-28). Now the fact that he said, 'He made him in the image of God', and was silent about the likeness, points to nothing else but this, that man received the honour of God's image in his first creation, whereas the perfection of God's likeness was reserved for him at the consummation. The purpose of this was that man should acquire it for himself by his own earnest efforts to imitate God, so that while the possibility of attaining perfection was given to him in the beginning through the honour of the 'image', he should in the end through the accomplishment of these works obtain for himself the perfect 'likeness'.[384]

Origen has much to say on the dynamic progression from image to likeness which is at the heart of his teaching on the soul's ascent and which encapsulates the process of divinization. According to the priest-theologian, God's perfect likeness is attained by traversing a path that consists of three stages, the preparatory stage

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[383] Butterworth here indicates Origen's debt to Plato's *Theaetetus* 176 B.

[384] Origen, *PArch* 3.6.1, in Butterworth (1973), p. 245.

of purification (*ethike*), the second stage of illumination and growth in knowledge (*physike*), and the final stage of union with God (*enoptike*). While this division is derived in part from Platonic and Middle Platonic teaching,[385] and while it is indeed possible to relate the three phases of the quest for God to the Greek disciplines of *ethics*, *physics*, and *enoptics,* Origen once again references the canon of the Old Testament, specifically the three books of Solomon, as a major influence on his work:

> Now it seems to me that certain wise men of the Greeks took these ideas from Solomon, since it was long before them in age and time that he first gave these teachings through the Spirit of God. . . . Thus, Solomon, since he wished to distinguish from one another and to separate what we have called earlier the three general disciplines, that is, moral, natural, and contemplative, set them forth in three books, each one in its own logical order. Thus, he first taught in Proverbs the subject of morals, setting regulations for life together, as was fitting, in concise and brief maxims. And he included the second subject, which is called the natural discipline, in Ecclesiastes, in which he discusses many natural things. And by distinguishing them as empty and vain from what is useful and necessary, he warns that vanity must be abandoned and what is useful and right must be pursued. He also handed down the subject of contemplation in the book we have in hand, that is, Song of Songs, in which he urges upon the soul the love of the heavenly and the divine under the figure of the bride and the bridegroom, teaching us that we must attain fellowship with God by the paths of loving affection and of love.[386]

The above words highlight Origen's lasting commitment to Scripture and its exegesis. They also provide us with a basic outline

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[385] Louth points to the Stoic as well as Middle Platonic origins of this teaching; see Louth (1981), p. 57; Dillon (1996), p. 272.

[386] Origen, *ComCt* Prologue 3*,* in *Origen: The Song of Songs. Commentary and Homilies*, trans. R. P. Lawson (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1957), pp. 40-41.

of his doctrine of the soul's ascent. Let us take the opportunity to look more closely at this highly influential Origenian teaching.

Taking as his starting-point the idea that human sin has shrouded the soul's image of the Logos in darkness thereby making participation in divine life impossible, Origen posits that the journey into the presence of God calls for the initial remission of sin in baptism and the progressive purification of the inner image.[387] In baptism, Christians begin their earnest effort to imitate the Lord by correcting flawed behavioral patterns and acquiring virtue. Baptism marks the beginning of a journey that allows them to become aware of their sinfulness, of the brittleness of transitory things, and of the need to turn their backs on worldly distractions. Seekers begin to clean inner faculties with which it is possible to behold spiritual truths and learn to distinguish between good and evil. They acquire greater self-knowledge and self-control, thus taking a first, all-important step toward the gradual restoration of the Logos' image.[388] Origen provides a summarizing outline of the first mystical stage in the following passage:

> If, then, a man has completed his course in the first subject, as taught in Proverbs, by amending his behaviour and keeping the commandments, and thereafter, having seen how empty is the world and realized the brittleness of transitory things, has come to renounce the world and all that is therein, he will fol-

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[387] Evidence that for Origen the mystical life begins with baptism can be found, for instance, in *HomCt* 1 in which he divides the journey toward God into seven songs, the first song describing the soul's coming out of Egypt and its crossing of the Red Sea, i.e. its conversion and baptism; see Lawson (1957), p. 266. For a discussion of the passage, see Louth (1981), pp. 55-56.

[388] For a detailed presentation of the initial stage of purification, see *HomNum 27*. In it, Origen interprets the 33rd Chapter of Numbers allegorically, suggesting that the wandering of the Israelites out of Egypt to the Promised Land sheds light on the soul's departure from the darkness of sin toward knowledge of God; see *Origen: An Exhortation to Martyrdom, On Prayer, First Principles IV, Prologue to the Commentary on the Song of Songs, Homily XXVII on Numbers*, trans. Rowan A. Greer (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), pp. 255-262. A close reading of the first stage and its individual stations is provided by Torjesen (1986), pp. 74-75.

> low on from that point to contemplate and to desire the things that are not seen, and that are eternal (2 Cor. 4:18).[389]

Throughout the first stage of the mystical journey, the Logos introduces the soul to a life of moderation, discernment, and virtue. In the second stage of the quest, the Logos deepens ties with the soul by guiding its charge toward greater knowledge and progressive illumination.[390] During this stage which can be divided into two phases, an earlier phase that is concerned with the acquisition of earthly knowledge and the soul's ability to understand the nature of temporal things and a later phase that seeks to develop the soul's comprehension of divine realities and spiritual mysteries, the Logos offers instruction on how to detect the inner principles, or *logoi*, of created things.[391] Based on the understanding that the material order is suffused by *logoi* and inherently linked to the invisible realm, Origen proposes that the close study of the manifest world and its underlying spiritual principles guides the soul toward knowledge of the heavenly sphere:

> Paul the apostle teaches us that the invisible things of God are understood by means of things that are visible, and that the things that are not seen are beheld through their relationship and likeness to things seen. He thus shows that this visible world teaches us about that which is invisible, and that this earthly scene contains certain patterns of things heavenly. Thus it is to be possible for us to mount up from things below to things above, and to perceive and understand from the things we see on earth the things that belong to heaven. On the pattern of these the Creator gave to His creatures on earth a cer-

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[389] Origen, *ComCt* Prologue 3, in Lawson (1957), pp. 45-46.

[390] For a detailed description of the second stage of the mystical quest, see Origen's explication in *HomNum* 27.12, in Greer (1979), pp. 263-268; see also Torjesen (1986), p. 75.

[391] The subdivision of the second stage is discussed in Torjesen (1986), pp. 82-83; Walther Völker, *Das Vollkommenheitsideal des Origenes: Eine Untersuchung zur Geschichte der Frömmigkeit und zu den Anfängen christlicher Mystik* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1931), pp. 91-98.

> tain likeness to these, so that thus their great diversity might be more easily deduced and understood.[392]

The notion that an "earthly scene contains certain patterns of things heavenly," to which Origen refers in the above words, is an important feature of his ascetical doctrine. For him, the only true knowledge of temporal things is the knowledge of their inner rationality, their *logoi*. *Logoi* have their origin in the Logos and are the means by which all things are formed. The *logos* of a thing is the imprint of the Logos imparted at creation. Like the *nous*, the *logos* thus reflects the image of its Creator. Given the inherent affinity between the *logoi* and the Logos, knowledge of the former implies partial knowledge of the latter.[393]

Considering the far-reaching implications of being able to discern the rational principles of created things, it is not surprising that Origen accords a central place to the acquisition of this particular skill. Without knowledge of the world and its underlying *logoi,* the soul cannot gain a deeper understanding of God; it cannot progress into the presence of Divinity. We will return to this aspect of Origen's doctrine as we consider the theologian's views on embodied existence toward the end of this section. It will serve as a welcome reminder that Origen, despite his call for the renunciation of worldly vanities, does not negate the inherent value of the material order, including the body.

Although knowledge of the *logoi* is an all-important step in gaining a fuller understanding of the Logos, the discernment of a thing's underlying principle, in turn, calls for greater knowledge of the Logos, its source. For this reason, the soul cannot progress beyond the second stage of the mystical journey, unless the Logos continuously mediates itself to its charge. The Word of God therefore fulfils its role as divine guide throughout the stage of illumination primarily by proclaiming itself. As the single Truth of which all natural and supernatural creations are but partial expressions, the Logos progressively enlightens the soul by communicating its own

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[392] Origen, *ComCt* 3.12, in Lawson (1957), p. 218.
[393] Torjesen (1986), pp. 82-83; Louth (1981), p. 60.

being.[394] By doing so, it permits the soul to assimilate to its Creator and to reflect heavenly attributes to an ever increasing degree.

The soul's direct encounter with God and its culminating divinization take place during the last stage of the mystical journey, the stage of perfection. Through the progressive self-mediation of the Logos in the second phase of the quest, the soul has successfully restored its divine inner image. It has ascended from partial to full knowledge of the Logos. By participating in the divine life of the Logos, the soul now attains knowledge of God. It is able to contemplate Divinity directly and to reflect its perfect likeness.[395] After a long struggle and much guidance by the Logos, the soul's earnest efforts to imitate its heavenly model and to restore the inner image to its original state are rewarded by a transformative union with God.

Throughout his elucidation of the soul's quest, Origen pays close attention to the role of the Logos. From the moment the soul embarks on the first stage of the journey until it reaches its goal in the third stage, the Logos is ever by its side. As has been indicated, during the stage of *ethike*, the Logos guides the soul toward a life of virtue. Throughout the stage of *physike*, the divine Word instructs the soul on the discernment of archetypal reality and illuminates it with heavenly knowledge. As the soul advances still further in its quest for perfection, the Logos initiates it into spiritual mysteries. Through its ongoing self-mediation, the Logos readies the soul for communion with God.

To convey the manifold means by which the divine Logos facilitates the soul's journey to God, Origen makes extensive use of the Son's scriptural titles.[396] For the priest-theologian, these titles, or *epinoiai,* pay tribute to the intimate tie between the Logos, the

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[394] Torjesen (1986), p. 119.

[395] Origen, *PArch* 2.11.3, in Butterworth (1973), p. 149.

[396] More information on Origen's *epinoiai* doctrine can be found in McGuckin (2004a), v.s. "Epinoiai," by Ronald E. Heine, pp. 93-95; idem (2004a), v.s. "Logos," by Joseph S. O'Leary, pp. 142-145; Virginia L. Noel, "Nourishment in Origen's 'On Prayer,'" in *Origeniana Quinta,* ed. R. J. Daly (Louvain: Peeters, 1992), pp. 481-487.

Christ, and the soul. They are powerful reminders of the former's salvific involvement in human affairs. According to Origen, Christ is the "Way" and the "Door." He opens the path to oneness with God. Those who know the Son, know the Father.[397] Christ is the "true Food" who nourishes the human soul.[398] As the soul's "Bread" and "Vine," he lends it spiritual strength and intoxicates it with heavenly wisdom. In other instances, Origen highlights Christ's vital role as mediator between the divine and the earthly realm by referring to him as the soul's "Physician," who prescribes bitter medicines to his ailing patient in the hope of introducing it to the sweetness of salvation.[399]

Origen's emphasis on the Logos' scriptural titles is an important means by which he establishes the bond between the soul and its heavenly guide. As noted by Bertrand in his work *Mystique de Jésus chez Origène* and Hausherr in *The Name of Jesus*, it is a feature through which Origen endows his writings with a deeply felt, embodied Jesus mysticism.[400] Revolving as it does around the person of the Redeemer and his revelation in the hearts of Christians, this Origenian teaching heralds the very personal, intuitive experience of God.

A text that reveals the extent of Origen's Jesus mysticism is his *Commentary on the Song of Songs,* a work that has been an inspiration to many Christian writers and that remains a key text of Christianity's mystical tradition to this day. While Origen provides vivid imagery to convey the intimacy between the soul and the Logos in many of his writings, not least by making use of the above mentioned *epinoiai,* he takes this feature to altogether new heights in his exposition of Solomon's love song. In it, the priest-theologian presents a detailed description of the soul's final ascent into the presence of God and, as he does so, focuses all of his attention on the

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[397] Origen, *ComJn* 19.39, in *Origen: Commentary on the Gospel According to John,* books 13-32, trans. Ronald E. Heine, FOTC 89 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), p. 176.

[398] Origen, *HomNum* 27.1, in Greer (1979), pp. 245-247.

[399] Origen, *HomNum* 27.1, in Greer (1979), p. 260.

[400] Frédéric Bertrand, *Mystique de Jésus chez Origène* (Paris: Aubier, 1951); Hausherr (1978), pp. 20-29.

mystical rather than the theoretical explication of this scriptural passage.[401] Let us consider Origen's exegesis of the biblical love song more closely and examine the degree to which it reflects his heart-felt devotion to the person of Christ.

In accordance with his allegorical reading of Scripture, Origen discusses the Song of Songs less in terms of a king marrying his bride or even of God speaking to Israel but rather in terms of the divine Logos addressing his bride. In Jerome's version of the Origenian commentary, the bride is predominantly viewed as the church, while Rufinus' version depicts the bride mostly as the soul who is initiated into the wedding chamber of her heavenly Bridegroom.[402] Within the latter context, Origen's primary concern is to describe the deep love the couple harbors for one another. As a means of conveying the intensity of feeling, the theologian employs the image of the dart and the wound of love:[403]

> If there is anyone anywhere who has at some time burned with this faithful love of the Word of God; if there is anyone who has received the sweet wound of Him who is the chosen dart, as the prophet says; if there is anyone who has been pierced with the loveworthy spear of His knowledge, so that he yearns and longs for Him by day and night, can speak of nought but Him, would hear of nought but Him, can think of nothing else, and is disposed to no desire nor longing nor yet hope, except for Him alone—if such there be, that soul then says in truth: 'I have been wounded by charity.'[404]

The above words bear tribute to the intimate nature of the relationship between the soul and the Logos. The love of the former for the latter is an intensely felt, visceral love. The Logos is no longer the abstract construct of Greek philosophy[405] but has been

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[401] Völker (1931), p. 98.

[402] McGuckin (2004a), "The Scholarly Works of Origen," by John A. McGuckin, p. 31.

[403] Crouzel (1989), p. 123.

[404] Origen, *ComCt* 3.8, in Lawson (1957), p. 198.

[405] The concept of the Logos held great prominence among Greek philosophers, especially among the Stoics who defined the Logos as the rational order of the universe and a life-giving force hidden within all

transformed into God's personalized Son, who is deeply committed to the soul's welfare and who makes his presence felt in a tangible way. The Logos is the divine lover and companion. He is the heavenly Bridegroom who ignites in his bride an all-consuming passion. This conception of the Logos can be found throughout Origen's exposition on the Song of Songs. In one instance, he describes the growing intimacy between the soul and the Logos within the context of prayer:

> While she [the bride] is thus praying to the Father, she is ready to add to this very prayer in which she said: 'Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth,' some further words of prayer, and to say that, even as she began to utter those words, the Bridegroom was present and standing by her as she prayed, and that He revealed His breasts to her . . . . And now let us enquire what the inner meaning holds. We find the ground principle of the heart described in the Divine Scriptures by different words according to the cases and circumstances that are being discussed. Sometimes it is simply called 'the heart,' as, for example: *Blessed are the clean of heart*, and: *With the heart we believe unto justice*. But if the occasion be that of a meal, and the appearance and order of those reclining at table are being described, it is called the 'bosom' or 'breast.'[406]

The above reference to the heart in general but especially within the context of prayer and its association with divine-human intimacy is of great interest. It indicates that Origen was well acquainted with the biblical notion of the heart and all that it entails, i.e. the need for purity of heart (the clean of heart are blessed), the heart as a person's moral center (it is with the heart that humans believe unto justice), and the heart as the place where divine mysteries are revealed (the Bridegroom reveals his breast, that is, his

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things. The Logos was seen as a spirit (*pneuma*) or a fiery vapour that forms and organizes all matter. As consciousness pervades the body, so the Logos permeates reality; see J. Pepin, "Logos," pp. 9-15, in *Encyclopedia of Religion,* vol. 9, ed. Mircea Eliade and Charles Adams (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), p. 9.

[406] Origen, *ComCt* 1.2, in Lawson (1957), pp. 63-64.

heart, to the bride).[407] Like the ancient Israelites, Origen conceived of this inner faculty as a place of divine indwelling. Once the soul has advanced sufficiently along the path of purification and illumination, it is able

> to receive 'the King reclining at His table' in herself. For this King says Himself: *I will dwell among them, and I will walk among them*, meaning among those, surely, who offer such roomy hearts to the Word of God that he may even be said to walk about in them, that is, in the open space of a fuller understanding and a wider knowledge.[408]

The heart is the place where the bride interacts with the Bridegroom. Here, she is initiated into heavenly teachings and re-

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[407] See also *HomCt* 1.6: "And in order that the mystery may be more clearly expressed, they do not say *leaning upon her Nephew's arm*, as we read in most versions—that is to say, *episterizoménē*, but *epistéthizoménē*, that is, *leaning upon His breast*. And it is significant that the expression used concerning the bride-soul and the Bridegroom-Word is *lying upon His breast*, because there is the seat of our heart;" in Lawson (1957), p. 276.

[408] Origen, *ComCt* 2.8, in Lawson (1957), p. 158. The spaciousness of the enlightened heart is a common theme in Origen's mystical thought. Reference to this phenomenon can be found, among others, in the following passage: "And rightly does he [Solomon] speak of 'stretching out his words' in the heart of him to whom God had given largeness of heart, as we said above. For the heart of a man is enlarged, when he is able, by taking statements from the Divine Books, to expand by fuller teaching the things that are said briefly and in enigmatic wayswords." Origen, *ComCt* Prologue 3, in Lawson (1957), p. 43. Another example is taken from Origen's *HomLc* 21.6: "If the human heart is pure, it is great and broad and spacious. Do you wish to know its size and its breadth? See what a great amount of divine thoughts it holds. . . . You see that man's heart, which can grasp so much, is not small. Realize that its greatness is measured not by the size of the body but by the strength of its awareness." In *Origen: Homilies on Luke*, trans. Joseph T. Lienhard, FOTC 94 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), pp. 90-91. For a discussion of Origen's teaching on the capacity of the heart, see Bertrand (1951), pp. 103-104.

ceives instruction on the importance of charity and love.[409] According to Origen, the quest for divine intimacy is rooted in love. Recapitulating his doctrine on the three stages of the mystical ascent, he writes:

> First, in Proverbs he [Solomon] taught the moral science . . . . Secondly, he covered the science known as natural in Ecclesiastes . . . . The inspective science likewise he has propounded in this little book that we have now in hand—that is, the Song of Songs. In this he instils into the soul the love of things divine and heavenly, using for his purpose the figure of the Bride and Bridegroom, and teaches us that communion with God must be attained by the paths of charity and love.[410]

The idea that the mystical journey is propelled by love and yearning for God is at the heart of the *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. The soul can hope to ascend into the presence of Divinity only if it is driven by a deep longing to experience the heavenly realm.[411] Origen's description of this process in terms of increasing intimacy between the bride and the Bridegroom, the soul and the Logos, reveals the heart-felt nature of the process. The mystical path cannot be reduced to an intellectual pursuit but involves all facets of human existence, including the affective.

The biblical concept of the heart provides Origen with the perfect tool to highlight this aspect of his teaching. Since the concept advances a holistic outlook and unites all aspects of human existence, Origen is able to suggest the all-embracing nature of the quest for God. He is able to convey the necessity of placing the mystical journey at the very center of Christian existence and of committing to it with all of one's being. Unless a person's search for divine union is motivated by deep passion, it cannot bear fruit. At no point is Origen less abstract and less theoretical than in his discussion of the soul's growing intimacy with God. At no point

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[409] J. Christopher King, *Origen on the Song of Songs as the Spirit of Scripture: The Bridegroom's Perfect Marriage-Song* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 169.

[410] Origen, *ComCt* Prologue 3, in Lawson (1957), p. 41.

[411] Origen, *ComCt* Prologue 3, in Lawson (1957), p. 41.

does he display his commitment to experiential knowledge of Divinity and to the Christian message of love with greater force.

Having begun our exploration of Origen's mystical teaching and its heart-felt tenor by examining salient passages from the *Commentary on the Song of Song*, let us now resume this discussion by consulting relevant passages from some of his other writings. Hopefully, this will allow us to observe further the degree to which the theologian articulated his ascetical doctrine by drawing on the biblical notion of the heart and, in doing so, tempered the lingering influence that abstract philosophical teaching, especially the concept of the noetic escape from matter, exerted over this doctrine.

As a means of determining more fully the degree to which a holistic, affective quality more commonly associated with the writings of early Christian Syrian ascetics colors Origen's mystical theology, we do well to take a second, more careful look at his use of the term *kardia*. How does Origen conceive of this concept, and how does it compare to the *nous*? Do they refer to unrelated human faculties, or does Origen view them as compatible? If we turn to the theologian's most systematic work, *On First Principles*, we soon find answers to these questions:

> But if the question is put to us why it was said, 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God', I answer that in my opinion our argument will be much more firmly established by the passage. For what else is 'to see God in the heart' but to understand and know him with the mind? . . . That heart is used for mind, that is for the intellectual faculty, you will certainly find over and over again in all the scriptures, both the New and the Old.[412]

Once again, we are made aware of the fact that Origen is well acquainted with the biblical tradition of the heart. Likewise, we come to realize that, for him, the heart is synonymous with the mind. The heart is not merely the affective center of human nature but also its intellective and spiritual center. It is the interior faculty

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[412] Origen, *PArch* 1.1.9, in Butterworth (1973), p. 14.

with which humans are able to meditate on God. We encounter a very similar viewpoint in Origen's apologetic work *Against Celsus:*

> Furthermore, in our view because God is not corporeal He is invisible. But He may be perceived by those who can perceive with the heart, that is the mind, though not with an ordinary heart, but with a pure heart. It is not right for a heart that has been defiled to look upon God; that which can deservedly perceive Him who is pure must be pure also.[413]

References to a pure, reasoning heart and to the compatibility of the terms *kardia* and *nous* can be found in many of Origen's writings. In his treatise *On Prayer*, the theologian reiterates this teaching and adds to his list of synonyms the term *psyche.*[414] By doing so, he allows us to witness the ease with which he moves from one designation to the other. Like the translators of the Septuagint, Origen is not opposed to the interchangeable use of the expressions *kardia*, *nous*, *psyche*, and *hegemonikon.*[415] On some occasions, he draws on the Platonist term *nous* to designate our deepest self. In other instances, he employs the Stoic term *hegemonikon* (governing faculty) or the biblical term *kardia.*[416] Regardless of his choice of words, it is important to note that, in each instance, the theologian seeks to describe the inner dimension that captures a person's nature in its essence and where humans encounter God in the most intimate of ways.

With these comments in mind, we can thus establish that Origen's frequent reference to the *nous* does not imply the exclusion of heart imagery from his vocabulary. His *Commentary of the Song of Songs* as well as several of his other writings indicate a lasting devotion to biblical heart language. For him, as for Syriac-speaking ascetics of the fourth century, the heart is the organ of contemplation. It is home to the divine image which, if purified, allows for

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[413] Origen, *CCels* 6.69, in *Origen: Contra Celsum*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), p. 383.

[414] Origen, *PEuch* 29.2, in Greer (1979), p. 152.

[415] J. Bauer, "Herz," *RAC* 14.1109.

[416] Crouzel (1989), p. 88.

direct contact with God.[417] As Origen writes in his exposition on Solomon's love song, the heart is the inner wedding chamber where the bride is presented with the Bridegroom's hidden treasures.[418]

Origen's reliance on the scriptural tradition of the heart and his reference in the *Commentary on the Song of Songs* to the heart as the Bridegroom's wedding chamber invites the question of whether he draws on the closely related biblical image of the temple. Does Origen make use of this particular motif? If so, does he interiorize it in much the same way in which Aphrahat does so a century later? Is the heart the new spiritual temple from which Christians offer their pure sacrifice of prayer? To answer these questions, it is helpful to take a look at a revealing passage from *Against Celsus*:

> After this Celsus says that *we avoid setting up altars and images and temples*, since, he thinks, it is *a sure token of an obscure and secret society*. He does not notice that our altars are the mind of each righteous man, from which true and intelligible incense with a sweet savour is sent up, prayers from a pure conscience. That is why it is said by John in the Apocalypse 'And the incense is the prayers of the saints', and by the Psalmist 'Let my prayers be as incense before thee'.[419]

In this passage, we have a clear indication of Origen's use of the temple motif,[420] of his concern to interiorize the motif, and of its association with pure prayer. The deepest layer of a person's being serves as God's altar from which the faithful offer their sweet-smelling sacrifice. In much the same way in which incense ascends from the physical altar, a prayer offered from a pure conscience, or a pure heart, rises up from the inner, spiritual altar. Origen expounds on this teaching in *On Prayer*:

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[417] Henri Crouzel, "Le cœur selon Origène," *Bulletin de litérature ecclésiastique* 85 (1984): 6.

[418] Origen, *ComCt* 1.5, in Lawson (1957), pp. 84-85; King (2005), p. 169.

[419] Origen, *CCels* 8.17, in Chadwick (1965), p. 464.

[420] Bertrand (1951), pp. 63-64.

> And He [God] who searches the hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God" (Rom. 8:26-27). The Spirit cries "Abba, Father" (cf. Gal 4:6) in the hearts of the blessed; and He knows by careful attention our sighs in this tabernacle, sighs suitable for weighing down those who have fallen or transgressed.[421]

Once again, Origen's interpretation of the heart in terms of a divine temple is apparent. The heart is a spiritual tabernacle. It is frequented by the Spirit who intercedes on behalf of the blessed. The Spirit aids humans in their endeavor to pray:

> Such prayers as were truly spiritual, since the Spirit prays in the heart of the saints, were written down, filled with secret and marvelous teachings. In 1 Samuel (1:11-13) part of Hannah's prayer is found, for "when she continued praying before the Lord," she spoke "in her heart" (1 Sam. 1:12-13), and the whole prayer was not put in writing.[422]

Drawing on the prominent Old Testament account of Hannah's silent prayer, Origen conveys the impact of prayer that is offered from the altar of the heart. What better gift, he inquires, "can a rational being send up to God than the fragrant word of prayer, when it is offered from a conscience untainted with the foul smell of sin?"[423] Origen is convinced that secret, inner prayer is the quintessential means of establishing intimacy with God. Prayer presented from the spiritual temple in which "the Father, who does not shun or abandon such a hidden place, . . . dwells . . . together with the presence of His Only Begotten"[424] has the power to introduce humans to divine life. It allows them to catch a glimpse of the Kingdom of Heaven, where Divinity resides on the throne of glory.[425] Origen's commitment to the reconceptualization of the biblical temple motif in terms of the human heart is lasting.

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[421] Origen, *PEuch* 2.3, in Greer (1979), p. 84.
[422] Origen, *PEuch* 2.5, in Greer (1979), p. 86.
[423] Origen, *PEuch* 2.2, in Greer (1979), p. 83.
[424] Origen, *PEuch* 20.2, in Greer (1979), p. 121.
[425] Origen, *PEuch* 25.3, in Greer (1979), p. 133.

Many of the above features call to mind the teaching of Origen's fourth century Syrian successors, Aphrahat, Ephrem, and Macarius. Given our discussion in previous chapters, the Origenian ideas of the ascetic as God's temple and of the heart as a spiritual altar from which pure prayer ascends toward heaven strike a familiar chord indeed. They reveal to us that Origen, like representatives of the Syrian mystical current, was eager to align himself with Christianity's Hebraic heritage, to interiorize aspects of this heritage, and to place them within a Christian context. The pure heart is the new Christian temple which harbors the throne of God and around which the host of angels assembles to pray, together with the Logos, for the repenting sinner.[426] The heart is the locale where, at the height of the mystical quest, the faithful are illuminated by divine light:

> For the eyes of the mind are lifted up from their preoccupation with earthly things and from their being filled with the impression of material things. . . . How would things so great fail to profit those eyes that gaze at the glory of the Lord with unveiled face and that are being changed into His likeness from glory to glory (cf. 2 Cor. 3:18)?[427]

By engaging in the process of purification, illumination, and perfection, Christians are able to gaze upon the Shekinah, the glory of the Lord, in their hearts. Origen's emphasis on God's self-revelation in this inner sanctuary constitutes an essential part of his mystical doctrine. By proposing that the heart can be transformed into a divine dwelling-place, he paves the way for a deeply personal encounter with God. For him, no less than for his Syrian successors, the inner presence of Divinity is a tender, tangible reality.

Origen's wish to interiorize the biblical temple motif begs the question of why he placed such emphasis on the spiritual interpretation of material reality. Why did Origen deem it necessary to highlight the inner dimension of Christian worship?

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[426] Origen, *PEuch* 11.1, in Greer (1979), p. 101.
[427] Origen, *PEuch* 9.2, in Greer (1979), p. 99.

We can better understand this aspect of Origen's mystical doctrine if we bear in mind that he articulated his teaching partly in opposition to the anthropomorphic conception of Divinity, which, in the third century, was a widespread phenomenon. This conception of the divine, which was perpetuated largely by Old Testament descriptions of God and by common Hellenistic religious practices, was vehemently rejected by Origen. According to the priest-theologian, God is wholly incorporeal, incomprehensible, and immeasurable.[428] God is a spiritual power "which when it lightens a man causes him either to see clearly the truth of all things or to know God himself who is called the truth."[429] Origen proceeds to argue that it is equally inaccurate to conceive of human faculties indiscriminately in physical terms. The names of the human organs of sense, for instance, are readily applied to the soul,

> so that we speak of seeing with the eyes of the heart, that is, of drawing some intellectual conclusion by means of the faculty of intelligence. . . . In a similar way we speak of it [the soul] as using all the other bodily organs, which are transferred from their corporeal significance and applied to the faculties of the soul; as Solomon says, 'You will find a divine sense'.[430]

In this passage, Origen references his doctrine of the five spiritual senses, a doctrine that appears to have originated with him and that exemplifies his tendency to interiorize material reality.[431] The theologian proposes that scriptural references to eyes, ears, and hands, with which humans perceive Divinity, do not designate physical limbs and organs but rather a person's spiritual senses. These senses are faculties of the heart, or the "interior man."[432] Prayer is uniquely suited to exercise the five divine senses. Like no

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[428] See, for instance, Origen, *PArch* 1.1.1-6, in Butterworth (1973), pp. 7-12.

[429] Origen, *PArch* 1.1.1, in Butterworth (1973), p. 7.

[430] Origen, *PArch* 1.1.9, in Butterworth (1973), p. 14.

[431] Karl Rahner, "Le debut d'une doctrine des cinq sens spirituels chez Origène," *Revue d'ascetique et de mystique* 13 (1932): 114. For an elucidation of Origen's teaching on the five spiritual senses, see also Louth (1981), pp. 67-69; Torjesen (1986), pp. 79-80.

[432] Rahner (1932): 118.

other activity, the silent meditation on God allows for the soul's purification, the heightening of its powers of spiritual perception, and the increasing discernment of God's inner presence.

Origen's reconceptualization of the temple motif and of the physical senses provides but two examples of his tendency to render material reality in spiritual terms. To further explore this aspect of his teaching, we will now consider a doctrine that is inseparably linked to the interior temple motif: his doctrine of the priesthood. As we will see, according to Origen, the authentic priest is the Christian who seeks divine intimacy by celebrating the inner liturgy. If Origen's emphasis on the interiorization of the priestly office seems to suggest his rejection of the common priesthood and the communal life it implies, the upcoming discussion will allow us to observe that this is not the case. On the contrary, for Origen, the very notion of spiritual priesthood hinges on a person's involvement in the affairs of the church.

Origen expounds his doctrine of spiritual priesthood primarily in the *Homilies on Leviticus* which he wrote eight years after his ordination.[433] Like so many of his doctrines, this particular teaching centers on the Logos and its unique position in the mystical life of believers. Priestly ministry cannot be conceived of without understanding the ministry of Christ, the archetypal High Priest.

Origen commences by suggesting that the priesthood of Old Testament priests in the order of Aaron has been superseded by the coming of the priesthood of Christ. The material sacrifice of animals in the Jerusalem Temple has given way to the only true sacrifice of Jesus, which he himself offered for the remission of human sin on the cross.[434] This sacrifice, of which Christ is simultaneously offerer and offering, has a deeply regenerating effect on human nature:

> Therefore, the one and perfect sacrifice, which all these sacrifices had anticipated in type and figure, is "Christ sacrificed."

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[433] For a close discussion of this doctrine, see John McGuckin, "Origen's Doctrine of the Priesthood," *Clergy Review* 70, no. 8 (August 1985): 277-286, no. 9 (September 1985): 318-325.

[434] McGuckin (1985): 277.

> If anyone should "touch" the flesh of this sacrifice, immediately, "he is sanctified." If he is unclean, if he is in "affliction," he is healed.[435]

The idea that the sacrifice of the incarnate Logos, the supreme mediator between God and humankind, allows for the spiritual reorientation of the created order has profound implications for the lives of individuals who strive to emulate their divine model. By committing to the ascetical life and seeking progressive purification, illumination, and perfection, these individuals are able to exercise their very own ministry of priesthood and to offer an interior sacrifice of salvation. Pursuit of the virtuous life allows them to share in the priesthood of Christ and to be "made into the image of Christ the High Priest who is the archetypal Priest and Victim of the same sacrifice."[436] The priestly work of reorienting themselves toward the heavenly sphere and of assimilating to the Logos reconciles humans to God:

> But each one of us also has in himself his whole burnt offering and he himself lights the altar of his whole burnt offering that it may always burn. . . . Blessed is he in whose heart he finds so subtle, so fine, and so spiritual an understanding and so composed with a diverse sweetness of virtues that he sees fit "to fill his hands" from it and to offer to God the Father the pleasing odor of his understanding.[437]

For Origen, the pursuit of the mystical life and the traversal of its successive stages is the means *par excellence* of igniting the fire of faith on the altar of the heart. It is the primary means of acquiring the priesthood of virtue and wisdom. Origen attributes such importance to a heart (or mind, depending on his use of terminology) that is illuminated by spiritual understanding as to refer to it not only in terms of an inner altar but also as the "priest within us:"

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[435] Origen, *HomLev* 4.8.1, in *Origen: Homilies on Leviticus*, trans. Gary Wayne Barkley, FOTC 83 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1990), pp. 81-82.

[436] McGuckin (1985): 284.

[437] Origen, *HomLev* 9.9.4-6, in Barkley (1990), pp. 196-198.

> The priest, and his sons, is in you the mind which is also its understanding in you who are rightly called a priest and "sons of a priest," for they are the only ones who perceive God and are capable of the knowledge of God.[438]

The priesthood of the wise, which epitomizes a person's assimilation to the Logos, is the highest manifestation of priesthood Origen envisions.[439] No priest is as authentic an image of the archetypal Priest as the wise and sainted ascetic. No altar is as pure as the heart of the Christian who has restored the divine internal image to its original resemblance to God.

At this point of our discussion, it is important to reiterate that Origen's teaching on the interiorization of the temple motif and on the spiritual realization of the gift of priesthood does not diminish his commitment to the church.[440] Neither teaching calls for the severance of relations with the community of the Spirit. The interior altar of the heart and the external altar of the church co-exist. Origen's own ordination to the priesthood supports this proposition. It also suggests that the priest-theologian situated his teaching within the context of human relatedness and communal outreach. Let us consider this feature in greater depth.

Origen insists that aspiration to the office of the spiritual priesthood implies the imitation of the cosmic Reconciler, Christ. The reconciliation achieved in Christ through his once-and-for-all sacrifice is a constant source of inspiration to Christians, as are his many deeds of charity. For Origen, an existence guided by compassion is at the heart of any endeavor to emulate the Priest of priests. The importance of a life guided by love and good works is ever on the theologian's mind:

> No one offers that sacrifice to the Lord unless one who, healthy and conscious of his salvation, renders thanks to the

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[438] Origen, *HomLev* 1.5.1, in Barkley (1990), p. 37.
[439] McGuckin (1985): 285.
[440] Bertrand (1951), pp. 64-66.

> Lord. Thus, no one who is sick in spirit and feeble in works can offer a "salutary sacrifice."[441]
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> Therefore, this "lamp" [of the temple lit by the priest] shines for each of us inasmuch as it has been lit by the oil of good works. But if we do evil and our works are evil, not only are we not lit, but we also extinguish that lamp for us and, that which Scripture says, is fulfilled in us: "Whoever does evil walks in darkness and whoever hates his brother walks in darkness." For he has extinguished the "lamp" of love and therefore walks in darkness. . . . "But whoever loves his brother" abides in the light of love and can say with confidence, "But I am as an olive tree bearing fruit in the house of God."[442]

As indicated by these citations, Origen establishes an inherent link between the spiritual priesthood and a Christian life of charity. The offering of a pure sacrifice depends on the transcendence of enmity and on the cultivation of love in action. Without deep commitment to communal outreach, it is impossible to assimilate to the High Priest.

Equally important to the office of the spiritual priesthood is the active service of propagating wisdom. When seekers have so thoroughly progressed in the moral life and learned the ways of God so intimately that they have become virtually "spiritualized," it is essential that they fulfill their duty to the rest of the community by serving as teachers and prophets.[443] Like no other, these individuals are qualified to serve as mentors to their contemporaries and to foster experiential knowledge of God:

> Whoever is "perfect" is taught by God himself about the reasons for the festivals and is not accustomed to learn these from a human teacher but he learns them from God, if anyone can grasp the voice of God. But whoever is not such, but is inferior, learns from him who has learned from God.[444]

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[441] Origen, *HomLev* 5.12.2, in Barkley (1990), p. 111.
[442] Origen, *HomLev* 13.2.4, in Barkley (1990), p. 235.
[443] McGuckin (1985): 284.
[444] Origen, *HomLev* 13.1.1, in Barkley (1990), p. 232.

> But let them [great priests and teachers] choose clean souls, "virgins in the simplicity of faith which is in Christ;" let them commit to them secret mysteries; let them speak to them the word of God and the secrets of faith that "Christ may be formed" in them through faith. Or, do you not know that from this seed of the word of God which is sown Christ is born in the heart of the hearers?[445]

The pursuit of the mystical life, that is, the pursuit of the spiritual priesthood of Christ, is ever associated with participation in the life of the church. Such participation may take the form of teacher, guide, leader, caretaker, or philanthropist. The earthly church is the body of Christ, and members of this body are in unity with each other because they are in unity with their Lord.[446] Like the individual soul, members of the church are called upon as a community to strive for perfection by mirroring their heavenly model. This mission implies the cultivation of interpersonal relationships through deeds of charity. Charity is the means by which Christians are reconciled with their neighbor and with God. It is the means by which the church, like the soul, becomes worthy of being called the bride of Christ. In Origenian thought, the mystical life and the ecclesial life are intimately linked. This is an important point to remember, for it challenges any proposition that Origen advocates the spiritualization of the individual at the expense of ecclesial, communal existence.

If Origen's emphasis on the spiritualization of material existence, including Christian worship, does not render void the importance of communal existence, neither does it negate the value of human embodiment. To be sure, his teaching on the body is ambiguous. The body can be a source of temptation and frustration.[447] It hampers the movement of the soul which entered an embodied state only after it had fallen into sin. Unlike the soul, the body does not reflect the divine image of the Logos.[448] But Origen neverthe-

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[445] Origen, *HomLev* 12.7.2, in Barkley (1990), p. 230.
[446] McGuckin (2004a), v.s. "Church," by William G. Rusch, p. 80.
[447] Brown (1988), p. 165.
[448] Ware (1997a), p. 97.

less acknowledges that the body is God's creation and therefore inherently good. Evil does not have its root in the soul's physical vessel but rather in demonic thoughts that cloud the mind and give rise to sins of the flesh. All sins of the flesh are therefore a profanation of the body.[449] Guided by Paul's admonition to the Corinthians, Origen proposes that bodies in their natural states are members of Christ and temples of the Holy Spirit. They are shrines that house the soul and the divine image imprinted thereon.

To better understand Origen's complex notion of the body, let us take another look at the theologian's anthropological teaching and pay special attention to his division of human nature into the three aspects, *pneuma* (spirit), *psyche* (soul), and *soma* (body). For Origen, the spirit is the divine element in human beings and is characterized by its continuity with the Hebrew *ruach,* which expresses the action of God. The spirit is a divine gift, the active aspect of grace, and, strictly speaking, not a part of the human personality.[450]

The division of the second constituent of human beings, the soul, into a higher and a lower aspect has already been noted in connection with our discussion of the *nous*. As was suggested earlier, the *nous*, *hegemonikon*, or *kardia* forms the higher aspect of the soul. Created in the image of God, it allows for participation in its model, the Logos, provided it has been adequately purified. The *nous* is the organ of the contemplative life. It bears the spiritual senses of sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste. It is also home to the human will, which, Origen insists, is free. While the *pneuma* and the *nous* are two distinct aspects in Origen's system, they are intimately connected in that they express the two fundamental aspects

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[449] Crouzel (1989), p. 91. In this instance, Origen is drawing on the following Pauline teaching: "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? . . . But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Shun fornication! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against the body iself. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?" (1 Cor 6:15, 17-19).

[450] Crouzel (1989), pp. 88-89.

of grace, the gift of God and the reception of this gift by the individual.[451]

The lower element of the soul was introduced with the fall, which marks the beginning of the soul's ongoing temptation to turn away from the spirit and yield to physical desires. This aspect of the *psyche* is the source of human instincts and passions. Origen refers to it by various names, such as *thumos* (anger), *epithumia* (covetousness), and *sarx*. While the former two designations are of Platonic origin, the latter is coined by Paul. Unlike *soma* (body), *sarx* (flesh) always has a pejorative sense:

> And now, I think, we must not pass over in silence the 'human temptations', those which occasionally arise from 'flesh and blood', or from 'the wisdom of flesh and blood', which is said to be at enmity with God. . . . When therefore it is said that 'the flesh warreth against the spirit', these persons understand the passage thus, that the use of the needs or delights of the flesh excite a man and draw and entice him away from divine and spiritual things.[452]

> Because of the touch, so to speak, of what is called the Holy Spirit upon their soul they possessed clear mental vision and became more radiant in their soul, and even in body, which no longer offered any opposition to the life lived according to virtue, in that it was mortified according to 'the mind of the flesh' as we call it.[453]

Although subject to the temptations of the flesh, the body is not intrinsically evil. Hence, Origen suggests that "it is not true that *the matter which dwells among mortals* is responsible for evils. Each person's mind is responsible for the evil which exists in him, and this is what evil is."[454] As suggested above, evil has its source in "the wicked suggestions of the opposing spirit,"[455] and, if unchecked by the mind, or the heart, finds expression in uncontrollable urges of

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[451] Crouzel (1989), p. 89.
[452] Origen, *PArch* 3.4.1, 4, in Butterworth (1973), p. 230, 235.
[453] Origen, *CCels* 7.4, in Chadwick (1965), p. 397.
[454] Origen, *CCels* 4.66, in Chadwick (1965), p. 237.
[455] Origen, *HomNum* 27.12, in Greer (1979), p. 265.

the flesh. Distracting, inflammatory thoughts that afflict the body can be overcome, however, if ascetics practice watchfulness, self-awareness, and self-control:

> We must bear in mind, however, that nothing else happens to us as a result of these good or evil thoughts which are suggested to our heart but a mere agitation and excitement which urges us on to deeds either of good or of evil. It is possible for us, when an evil power has begun to urge us on to a deed of evil, to cast away the wicked suggestions and to resist the low enticements and to do absolutely nothing worthy of blame.[456]

Because the soul is the seat of the free will, because humans have the power of choice, they are able to resist physical temptation. Given great astuteness of inner thought processes and of their physical manifestations, a person can learn to recognize untoward stirrings and choose to follow the guidance of the spirit. By doing so, the soul becomes increasingly spiritual, even in its lower element,[457] and the body remains undefiled by sins of the flesh. If, on the other hand, the will of the soul succumbs to the influence of evil and yields to its enticements, humans experience the corruption of the soul as well as the body and invite their own death. Origen is emphatic that the will plays a decisive role in determining a person's fate:

> If this is so, it is plain that the will of this soul is something intermediate between the flesh and the spirit, undoubtedly serving and obeying one of the two, whichever it has chosen to obey. If it gives itself up to the delights of the flesh, it makes men fleshly; if, however, it joins itself to the spirit, it causes a man to be 'in the spirit' and on this account to be called spiritual. It is this that the apostle seems to indicate when he says, 'Ye are not in the flesh, but in the spirit'.[458]

Given the power of the will and its ability to align itself consciously with the spirit even in the presence of mental and physical

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[456] Origen, *PArch* 3.2.4, in Butterworth (1973), p. 217.
[457] Crouzel (1989), p. 88.
[458] Origen, *PArch* 3.4.2, in Butterworth (1973), p. 233.

distraction, the body does not pose a hindrance to the ascetical life. While its materiality no doubt limits the possibilities of the soul, Origen sees great justice and mercy in God's decision to place the fallen soul within the temporary confinements of a specific material vessel. As Brown succinctly writes:

> For Origen, the fall of each individual spirit into a particular body had not been in any way a cataclysm; to be placed in a body was to experience a positive act of divine mercy. He distanced himself from many of his contemporaries by insisting that the body was necessary for the slow healing of the soul. It was only by pressing against the limitations imposed by a specific material environment that the spirit would learn to recover its earliest yearning to stretch beyond itself, to open itself "ever more fully and more warmly" to the love of God. The body posed a challenge that counteracted the numb sin of self-satisfaction. . . . The gentle precision of God's mercy ensured that each body was adjusted to the peculiar needs of its soul down to the finest details, much as the lines of each person's handwriting remained unmistakably their own.[459]

Origen proposes that God has foreknowledge of all the differences that arise among souls and, based on these differences, endows each soul with a bodily covering suited to its specific circumstances and needs. Placed in a body and exposed to the limitations it imposes, the soul is given the opportunity to become proficient in the most important of virtues, in humility. Bodily rhythms and demands expose the soul to many trials which, if mastered, allow for its gradual transformation.[460] In this respect, the body fulfills an important role in a person's spiritual existence.[461] It is a divine gift that sets the soul on its path toward health. Embodiment inflicts limitation and suffering and, by doing so, presents the soul with constant opportunities to grow, to evolve, and, eventually, to attain perfection.

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[459] Brown (1988), pp. 164-166.
[460] Brown (1988), p. 237.
[461] Crouzel (1989), p. 91.

In the attempt to establish the theologian's regard for the body, one further teaching is notable, the Origenian *logoi* doctrine. As indicated earlier, this doctrine validates the essential goodness of material existence by proposing that all created things bear within themselves the imprint of the Logos, their Creator. Visible things are partial expressions of the Logos; they display elements of the divine. Visible things point the way toward the heavenly realm and allow humans to catch a glimpse of the world to come.

Origen highlights the inherent goodness of embodied existence by applying this principle to the body and by proposing that the ethereal body, with which intellects were clothed before the fall, that is, before their ardor cooled and they were reduced to souls, survives in the earthly body in the form of the *logos*, the rational principle.[462] Whereas the quality of the body changed at the fall from heavenly to earthly, its substance and underlying principle remained unaltered. At the resurrection, the body will change once again to be transfigured into it former ethereal state. Devoid of material nature, the soul's bodily covering will shine in all its splendor:

> When the universe has been subjected to Christ and through Christ to God, with whom it becomes 'one spirit' in view of the fact that rational beings are spirits, then also the bodily substance itself, being united to the best and purest spirits, will be changed, in proportion to the quality or merits of those who wear it, into an ethereal condition, according to the apostle's saying, 'and we shall be changed', and will shine with light.[463]

Origen proposes that the bodies of "those who are considered worthy of the resurrection of the dead become like the bodies of

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[462] For Origen's teaching on the existence of ethereal bodies prior to the fall, see, for instance, *PArch* 2.3.1, in Butterworth (1973), pp. 83-84. In this passage, Origen asserts that absolute incorporeality is the privilege of the Trinity alone; see also Crouzel (1989), p. 91.

[463] Origen, *PArch* 2.3.7 in Butterworth (1973), p. 93.

the angels, ethereal, a dazzling light."[464] The mortal quality of their physical vessel will be changed into one that is divine.[465] Like the soul, the body will be subsumed in spirit.[466]

While Origen's emphasis on the spiritualization of the body may seem to contradict his teaching on its inherent goodness, it is helpful to bear in mind that such a spiritualization signals the body's return to its natural, pre-fallen state. In this unmarred state, it is once again able to fulfill its true purpose, which is to

> be a temple to the Lord; that the soul, being holy and blessed, should act in it as if it were a priest serving before the Holy Spirit that dwells in you. In this manner, Adam had a body in Paradise; but in Paradise he did not 'know' Eve.[467]

Having served as mentor of the soul throughout the latter's earthly sojourn, the body has fulfilled its mission and reexperiences complete balance, health, and peace.

Like the *logoi* of created things, then, the *logos* of the body bears witness to its creation in the image of God and its fundamental goodness. It, too, signals the inherent connection between the earthly and the heavenly sphere. While the terrestrial body is ever in danger of succumbing to physical temptation, it can be freed from afflictions of the flesh if the will consciously aligns itself with God. This choice presents the first step toward the spiritualization of the body, which culminates in its illumination by deifying light at the resurrection and lasting knowledge of Deity.

With these thoughts in mind, we conclude our discussion of Origen. Having outlined essential features of his mystical doctrine, we are now, hopefully, in a better position to evaluate its impact on the tradition of the prayer of the heart. With Origen originated the Christian doctrine of the soul's ascent into the presence of God

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[464] Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* 17.30, cited in Crouzel (1989), p. 251.

[465] Origen, *CCels* 3.41, in Chadwick (1965), p. 156.

[466] Mark Julian Edwards, *Origen Against Plato* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2002), p. 161.

[467] Origen, *Fragments on 1 Corinthians* 29, cited in Brown (1988), p. 173.

and the division of this ascent into a threefold journey. This teaching advanced nothing less than the progressive divinization of human beings and their participation, at the height of the quest, in the life of Divinity. Many subsequent teachers of inner prayer were to adopt this doctrine, and, while they expanded on it, they never abandoned Origen's fundamental axioms. The emphasis on the purification and illumination of the soul's divine image through careful self-inquiry would remain a cornerstone of later ascetical teachings. Like Origen, his followers were to insist on the reality and immeasurable value of this inner image, the vital link between God and humankind. They, too, believed that no endeavor is as conducive to the purification of the image and to the traversal of the mystical path as inner prayer.

With Origen, we also encounter a theologian who, despite his debt to the Greek philosophical tradition, was deeply committed to Christianity's biblical heritage and its incarnational spirit. His devotion to the personalized Logos, to Christ, was fervent. For him, knowledge of God was a felt experience which was rooted in the ongoing, loving visitation of the soul by the Logos. Through the mediating activity of the Logos, seekers were capable of experiencing the transformation of their hearts into divine dwelling-places and to know God in the most intimate of ways.

Origen's emphasis on the direct encounter with God in the heart and his conceptualization of worship in terms of a spiritual act had implications for his understanding of the body as well as the church. If the heart was the altar on which Christians offered their pure prayer, the body was God's earthly temple and deserving of high regard. Deserving of high regard, too, was the community of the church which provided Christians with ever new opportunities to engage in works of service. Like Syrian theologians, Origen believed that Christians could approach the inner liturgical site only after they had been reconciled with fellow beings. For him, the imitation of the cosmic Reconciler was at the heart of a prayerful existence. While Origen knew extended periods of silent contemplation to be the very core of such an existence, he proposed that it remain embedded in the local community and its philanthropic mission. Origen's commitment to his own ministry bears lasting witness to this conviction.

Perhaps most striking about Origen is his ability to combine great intellectual astuteness with a deeply felt and tender Jesus mys-

ticism. The priest-theologian articulated a mystical doctrine that was intellectually stimulating and emotionally engaging. His familiarity with philosophical concepts enabled him to describe a person's inner landscape with care and to show how the successive stages of the soul's journey might best be traversed. His deep devotion to the person of Christ and to the lived experience of the ascetical life allowed him to guide Christians toward a personal, visceral encounter with God. Despite his intellectual prowess and learnedness, Origen did not view the discernment of Divinity as a matter of theoretical striving, but encouraged members of his audience to experience the Christian message tangibly. In this respect, his teaching is ever dynamic and alive.

Origen's ability to combine philosophical insight with passionate devotion to the personalized Logos suggests that elements of Greek and Syrian mystical thought can be reconciled with ease. Like the Syrian theologians discussed in the previous chapter, Origen articulated his doctrine along a continuum. The priest-theologian, for his part, was more likely to veer toward the Hellenic end of this spectrum and to draw on Greek terminology to present his understanding of the soul's progression into the presence of God. This, however, does not imply that he neglected the biblical tradition of the heart. As this discussion has attempted to show, Origen's ascetical writings are constant reminders of his commitment to the visceral experience of God in the impassioned heart. For him, the encounter with Divinity in this inner domain and the illumination of the upward striving *nous* were at all times compatible.

The Origenian intermarriage of intellectual and experiential components of the mystical life may benefit contemporary Christians for a number of reasons. For one, this approach suggests that today's common distinction between doctrinal and mystical theology, between theology and spirituality, is a distinction that was not part of Christian teaching in its early stages. Origen viewed these disciplines as inseparable aspects of one belief system, a system that sought nothing less than to provide humans with the opportunity

of attaining the fullness of mystical union.[468] To the extent to which he insisted that this union be participatory in nature, involving the body as well as the community of the church, his ascetical teaching is of further interest for presenting contemporary seekers with a theology that is integrative in its approach. The implementation of Origenian doctrine neither exposes individuals to a gospel of dualism nor does it advocate an otherworldliness which they are unable to reconcile with the demands of modern day living. In the quest for divine intimacy, today's Christians need not divorce the mind from the body or transcend the inherently relational nature of human existence. Given Origen's premise that the process of purification, illumination, and perfection depends on a life of embodiment and relationality, seekers can engage in the mystical life even while involved in affairs of the world. If they conduct daily tasks with the intention of fashioning themselves after their divine model, they are able, in the midst of worldly turmoil, to transform the heart into a liturgical site and to become true followers of the Priest of priests.

EVAGRIUS OF PONTUS

Evagrius of Pontus (345-399) was Origen's most devoted follower and instrumental in bequeathing to posterity many prominent features of his teacher's mystical doctrine. A disciple of the Cappadocians and one of the brightest theologians of his generation, Evagrius was a skillful interpreter of the human psyche, and he devoted much of his later life—once he had settled in the Egyptian desert—to the recording of his insights into intrapsychic processes. His close contact with the first generation of desert fathers, including Macarius of Alexandria, his spiritual father, as well as his theological learnedness uniquely qualified him to offer practical guidance on many aspects of the ascetical life, including the controlling of psychological states, the taxonomy of virtues and vices, and the discernment of spirits. Despite his posthumous condemnation at

[468] Lossky (1998), p. 10.

the Council of Constantinople II in 553, Evagrius' mystical doctrine exerted a lasting influence over the prayer of the heart.[469]

Given Evagrius' commitment to the Origenian legacy, the upcoming inquiry will address many concepts explored in the discussion of Origen. The Evagrian doctrine of the soul's triadic ascent into the presence of God, of the divine image, of the five spiritual senses, and of the presence of *logoi* in the ontological fabric of the cosmos are but some teachings that will strike a familiar chord. If we begin our discussion with the last of these teachings, Evagrius' understanding of *logoi* as seeds of divine presence in the cosmic order, we will have a first opportunity to observe just how pervasive of an influence Origen exerted over the ascetical theology of his disciple. By starting our inquiry with this particular teaching, we will also be in a good position to gain a deeper understanding of Evagrius' conception of the mystical path.

Like Origen, Evagrius conceives of *logoi* as the rational principles or inner meanings of created things. The *logos* of a created thing expresses the purpose of Divinity. It is the reason why a thing exists in the scheme of God's providence and judgment.[470] By contemplating the "divine book" of creation and discerning the true nature of things, individuals can detect, as it were, the fingerprints of God's presence in the world. They are able to perceive the inherent order of the universe.

Since *logoi* are imprints of the Logos, the Creator of the cosmos, ascetics who meditate on the rational principle of things are given the privileged opportunity of contemplating partial expressions of the divine Logos, the one who is perceptible through the multiplicity of beings.[471] Given time, practice, and effort, partial knowledge of the Logos through the contemplation of a thing's spiritual essence gives way to knowledge of the Logos through direct contemplation. The more adept seekers become in discerning,

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[469] McGuckin (2004b), "Evagrius of Pontus," p. 133.

[470] Jeremy Driscoll, *Steps to Spiritual Perfection: Studies on Spiritual Progress in Evagrius Ponticus* (New York: Newman Press, 2005), p. 41.

[471] Luke Dysinger, *Psalmody and Prayer in the Writings of Evagrius Ponticus* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 98.

first, the Logos' divine imprints in the universe and, thereafter, the presence of the Logos itself, the greater their ability to ascend from peripheral to archetypal reality.

Evagrius is adamant that the first step toward the discernment of archetypal reality is commitment to the virtuous life. He writes:

> We practice the virtues in order to achieve contemplation of the inner essences (*logoi*) of created things, and from this we pass to contemplation of the Logos who gives them their being.[472]

Evagrius points to the virtuous life as a vital prerequisite for the contemplation of a thing's *logos* in the full awareness that enslavement to vice prevents a person from engaging in such contemplation and, hence, from acquiring greater knowledge of God. He bases this observation on the understanding that devious behavior is caused by evil thoughts, or *logismoi,* which are instilled by cunning demons in the human mind with the sole intention of distracting it to such a degree as to render meditation on the *logoi* impossible. The wish to guide ascetics away from affliction by *logismoi* toward the contemplation of the deep-down reality of the cosmos and, eventually, toward the contemplation of Divinity itself is at the heart of Evagrius' teaching on the triadic mystical path. We will now take a look at this important Evagrian doctrine.

In his discussion of the quest for God, Evagrius follows Origen's lead by introducing the idea that the *nous* is a person's center of spiritual intelligence and the locus of the Logos' divine image. For Evagrius, the *nous* is pure spirit in its original state and, even after the fall, remains a wholly spiritual reality. While it expands to include the soul in the form of an outgrowth or addition, the *nous* is not an integral part of the soul as is the case in Origen's anthropological teaching. Rather, it remains a distinct intrapsychic entity.[473]

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[472] Evagrius, *Prayer* 52, in *Philokalia* 1, pp. 61-62.

[473] Michael O'Laughlin, "Elements of Fourth Century Origenism: The Anthropology of Evagrius Ponticus and Its Sources," in Kannengiesser and Petersen (1988), pp. 364-365.

Reminiscent of his third century predecessor, Evagrius suggests that the original purity and radiance of the *nous*' divine image was lost at the fall and that it is in dire need of purification. The process of purification is no small matter and forces humans to become increasingly aware of the many-varied *logismoi* which, as mentioned above, are the device of resourceful demons seeking to distract the mind and to prevent its mediation on the *logoi*. Only if humans submit to a rigorous set of ascetical practices and learn to control distracting thoughts and the thwarted behaviors to which they give rise (most notably, gluttony, lust, avarice, dejection, anger, listlessness, vainglory, and pride),[474] can they hope to attain a clearer vision of God's all-pervasive, cosmic presence.

Evagrius is also indebted to Origen for the division of the mystical path into a threefold progression. Replacing Origen's choice of words, *ethike*, *physike*, and *enoptike,* with the terms *praktike*, *physike*, and *theoria,* he proposes that the first stage of the journey, the stage of *praktike*, focuses on the active life which begins with repentance and the radical conversion of the soul toward God. Like his teacher, Evagrius points to the importance of stilling the mind, of overcoming disordered impulses, and of acquiring greater virtue. He cautions fellow ascetics that

> the demon is very envious of us when we pray, and uses every kind of trick to thwart our purpose. Therefore, he is always using our memory to stir up thoughts of various things and our flesh to arouse the passions, in order to obstruct our way of ascent to God.[475]

As a means of cutting short the maneuvers of God's adversaries, Evagrius advises monks to watch carefully over the two lower parts of the human soul, desire (*epithumia*) and incensive power (*thumos*). Desire, he suggests, is best destroyed through fasting, vigils, and sleeping on the ground, while a person's incensive power may be tamed through long-suffering, forbearance, forgiveness,

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[474] Evagrius' eight types of *logismoi* were reformulated and presented by John Cassian as the seven deadly sins; see Ware (1997c), pp. 397-398.

[475] Evagrius, *Prayer* 47, in *Philokalia* 1, p. 61.

and acts of compassion.[476] If seekers engage in these practices with compunction and heart-felt grief for past sins, they are able to calm their agitated minds and to achieve freedom from passion, or *apatheia.* They enter a state in which mental distraction and physical temptation cease to compromise the intellect's natural tranquility. With the onset of *apatheia* at the height of the first stage, the mind is able to focus all of its awareness on God.[477]

The ability to enter a state of dispassion and stillness, which is essential to the discernment of Divinity, is deepened by training in noetic contemplation throughout the second stage of the mystical journey, the stage of *physike.* Now in control of impassioned thoughts and master of the soul's two lower elements, the mind is free to devote itself to the contemplation of the inner principles of created things, a task that, as we have seen, is vital to the progressive apprehension of the Logos. The trying battle to clear away the *logismoi* has been won, granting ascetics the freedom to explore the spiritual essence of the cosmic order. "Whereas the impure have no insight into these essences, and . . . will fail because of the great clouds of dust and the turmoil aroused by their passions at the time of battle,"[478] individuals who have begun to discern the all-pervasive presence of Divinity by meditating on the cosmic order draw one step closer to knowledge of God.

While it is essential for monks to perceive the divine presence through the works of creation, the next task at hand is to approach Divinity directly. The contemplation of created things is still described by a form of meditation that impresses upon the intellect the many shapes of the realm of multiplicity. The contemplation of God, however, implies meditation on absolute unity:

> If the intellect has not risen above the contemplation of the created world, it has not yet beheld the realm of God perfectly. For it may be occupied with the knowledge of intelligible things and so involved in their multiplicity.[479]

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[476] Evagrius, *Disc* 3, in *Philokalia* 1, p. 39.
[477] Louth (1981), pp. 106-108.
[478] Evagrius, *Disc* 20, in *Philokalia* 1, p. 50.
[479] Evagrius, *Prayer* 58, in *Philokalia* 1, p. 62.

To behold the realm of God perfectly, the mind has to enter a state of inner silence, or *hesychia*, in which concepts about God are replaced by a sense of Divinity's immediate presence. Evagrius refers to this state of interior silence and uninterrupted contemplation of Deity as the state of pure prayer. It constitutes the summit of the mystical journey, the stage of *theoria*, and is characterized by the transcendence of all thought:

> Never try to see a form or shape during prayer.[480]
>
> I shall say again what I have said elsewhere: blessed is the intellect that is completely free from forms during prayer.[481]

Christians who engage in pure prayer will not permit their intellects to "be stamped with the impress of any form but approach the Immaterial in an immaterial manner."[482] Divinity is a mystery beyond words and understanding and, hence, discernible only if the *nous* contemplates it without resorting to thoughts, concepts, or images.[483] At the summit of the mystical quest, contemplation is absolutely simple. Awareness of the subject-object differentiation recedes, and the mind is filled with a sense of all-embracing unity:

> When like torrents to the sea the minds return to him, he completely changes them to his own nature, colour and taste: in his endless and inseparable unity, they will be one and no longer many, since they will be united and joined to him.[484]

In undistracted prayer, the *nous* engages in the highest noetic activity possible and fixes all of its attention on God.[485] Its pure state is marred by nothing that might leave an imprint on its fabric and prevent union with Divinity. Although this experience is transient, for only the mind that is separated from the body and wholly

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[480] Evagrius, *Prayer* 114, in *Philokalia* 1, p. 68.
[481] Evagrius, *Prayer* 117, in *Philokalia* 1, p. 68.
[482] Evagrius, *Prayer* 67, in *Philokalia* 1, p. 63.
[483] Ware (1997c), p. 399.
[484] Evagrius, *EM* 28, in Augustine Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 69.
[485] Dysinger (2005), p. 99.

naked can sustain this state of pure, immaterial prayer,[486] it allows humans to catch a glimpse of heavenly glory in the here and now.

Judging by this initial outline of Evagrius' mystical doctrine, it would appear that evidence supports its classification as a very abstract teaching. Elements of Evagrius' metaphysics, such as references to the soul's formless, intellective contemplation of God or to prayer as the mind's highest possible intellection, undoubtedly invite such a reading. So, too, does the theologian's emphasis on the rigorous implementation of ascetical practices to control the lower parts of the human soul and his emphasis on the attainment of *apatheia*, a state which, although descriptive of the transformation and redirection of the passions,[487] is often interpreted in terms of their suppression. Do these features not suggest that Evagrius conceived of the mystical quest primarily as a noetic ascent away from materiality?

While parts of Evagrian thought are indeed highly speculative, we cannot gain a balanced picture of his doctrine without taking into consideration Evagrius' association with the earliest Egyptian desert fathers, an association which propelled him to adopt a deeply experiential approach to the ascetical life. If we heed this aspect of the theologian's legacy and acknowledge his contributions as a spiritual guide, we stand a better chance of looking beyond the brilliant, albeit exceedingly cerebral Origenian systematician toward the devout Christian ever committed to the personal encounter with God.[488]

With this objective in mind, it is helpful to consider Evagrian writings that suggest a more favorable reading of embodied, relational existence. As we do so, we soon come to realize that the fourth century theologian is as careful as Origen not to divorce his mystical doctrine from the incarnational spirit of Christianity and

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[486] Louth (1981), p. 111.

[487] Ware (1997c), p. 398.

[488] For comments on the importance of considering Evagrius the man and spiritual guide, see *Evagrius of Pontus. Briefe aus der Wüste,* trans. Gabriel Bunge (Trier: Paulinus-Verlag, 1986), pp. 17-21; see also Casiday (2006), pp. 25-28.

to accord to Christ, the divine Physician and Reconciler, pride of place in his system.[489] For Origen and Evagrius alike, mystical knowledge is inextricably linked to the imitation of Christ and to the flowering of love. Mystical knowledge implies close adherence to a life of charity and active service. Like Origen, Evagrius does not reduce the contemplation of God to an intellectual pursuit. Human beings apprehend Divinity intuitively and are able to participate in divine life, because they are motivated by a deep longing to experience God on a heart-felt level. To explore this feature more fully, we will now examine Evagrius' use of biblical heart language and the degree to which recourse to this language infuses his teaching with an intimate, devotional character.

To begin with, it is important to establish that Evagrius follows Origen in viewing the two expressions *nous* and *kardia* as inherently compatible. While the compatibility of these two terms may be lost on readers who focus their attention primarily on his better known works, the study of writings commonly viewed as being of minor importance, such as his letters, his notes on Scripture, and the *Ad Monachos*, allows us to come to a better understanding of the theologian's position on this matter.[490] By examining these sources, we realize that Evagrius made ample use of biblical heart imagery and moved freely between the language of Scripture and the vocabulary of Platonic teaching. Let us consider a number of relevant passages:

> It is only in front of wisdom that the demons are powerless because they are not able to throw evil thoughts into the heart (*kardian*) of one who has become wise. For the mind (*nous*) that is touched by the contemplations of wisdom becomes unreceptive to impure thoughts.[491]

> Where evil enters in, there also ignorance; but the hearts (*kardiai*) of holy ones will be filled with knowledge.[492]

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[489] See, for instance, Evagrius, *Disc* 3, in *Philokalia* 1, p. 40.

[490] Driscoll (2005), pp. 77-78.

[491] Evagrius, *Schol Prov* 3.15, cited in Driscoll (2005), p. 82.

[492] Evagrius, *Monachos* 24, in *Evagrius Ponticus: Ad Monachos*, trans. Jeremy Driscoll (New York: Newman Press, 2003), p. 45.

> Better a fast with a pure heart (*kardias*) than a feast in impurity of soul (*psyches*).[493]

All three passages allow us to observe that Evagrius does not view the heart and the mind as two distinct human faculties. For him, they stand in virtual apposition.[494] Both entities describe a person's fundamental instrument of contemplation. They indicate the inner dimension with which Christians meditate, first, on the *logoi* of created things and, eventually, on God. Here, sanctified humans have recourse to divine knowledge. The last of the above passages allows us to observe that Evagrius also includes the soul (*psyche*) in his list of compatible terms. Heart, mind, and soul alike serve as the place where Divinity is apprehended. Once this inner dimension has ceased to be afflicted by *logismoi* and has become absolutely still, absolutely simple, it rests in the presence of God.

The above citations further suggest that Evagrius is greatly concerned with emphasizing the need for a wise and pure heart. Like so many early Christian ascetics, be they of the Greek-speaking or the Syriac-speaking world, he cannot conceive of perfection apart from inner purity and reintegration. Evagrius commonly refers to this state of being as *apatheia*, but the biblical term descriptive of this state, purity of heart, is not absent from his vocabulary:

> Here he calls "gift" purity of heart, for it is in proportion to our passionlessness (*apatheias*) that we are judged worthy of knowledge.[495]

The compatibility of the two concepts is illustrated further in the following words:

> In the gentle[496] heart (*kardia*), wisdom will rest; a throne of passionlessness (*apatheias*): a soul accomplished in *praktike*.[497]

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[493] Evagrius, *Monachos* 44, in Driscoll (2003), p. 48.

[494] Driscoll (2005), p. 82.

[495] Evagrius, *Schol Prov* 19.17, cited in Driscoll (2005), p. 81.

[496] As will be shown shortly, Evagrius establishes a close link between the "gentle" and the "pure" heart.

[497] Evagrius, *Monachos* 31, in Driscoll (2003), p. 46.

In Evagrian thought, the term *apatheia*, which the theologian borrows from the Stoic tradition, expresses the same state of being as the biblical notion of the pure heart. Passionlessness and purity of heart are two ways of saying the same thing.[498] Both terms describe a state in which the instrument of contemplation, the heart or the mind, is no longer darkened by inflammatory thoughts. The two lower aspects of the soul have been calmed and contribute to the quest for divine knowledge. Ascetics are able to pray without distraction. Their purified hearts "understand the reasons of God."[499]

If Evagrius makes frequent use of the notion of the pure heart, he also draws on the concept of the enlarged heart, a concept we briefly observed in the work of Origen.[500] Adhering to his mentor's rendition of the phrase, Evagrius associates the enlarged heart with an increase in knowledge. A heart that has been enlarged by purity is able to comprehend the maneuvers of demonic adversaries and to forestall the renewal of their attack.[501] It is free to contemplate the essence of the created order and to touch on archetypal reality. The enlarged heart is also free to love. Evagrius insists that *agape* is the offspring of *apatheia*.[502] A heart that is no longer bound by desire and passion is able to love.

Evagrius' emphasis on a pure, enlarged heart and on its close link with love does much to dispel the claim that he favors the intellectual interpretation of Christian teaching over its daily, practical application. Indeed, if we take a closer look at his doctrine of love, we come to realize how prominent of a role love plays in his conception of the ascetical life. Love unites the active and the contemplative aspects of the mystical journey by serving as the goal of the

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[498] Driscoll (2005), p. 91.

[499] Evagrius, *Schol Prov* 22.20, cited in Driscoll (2005), p. 86.

[500] For Origen's use of the expression, see n. 408.

[501] Louth (1981), p. 107.

[502] Evagrius, *Prak* 81, in *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, trans. Robert E. Sinkewicz (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 110.

practical life and as the doorway to contemplation.[503] Love allows ascetics to acquire divine knowledge and to draw closer to God. It is the only way of attaining knowledge of Deity:

> Faith: the beginning of love. The end of love: knowledge of God.[504]

The idea that love leads to divine knowledge does not imply that Evagrius subordinates the former to the latter. On the contrary,

> Through love the mind sees Original Love, God. Through our love we see the love of God for us.[505]

Love is the essence of God.[506] Hence, knowledge of God implies knowledge of Original Love. Guided by the axiom that only like can know like, Evagrius proposes that the loving heart alone can know Original Love. He further notes that the divine source of all earthly love is revealed to humankind in Christ, a teaching which implies that any person who sins against love sins against Christ, he who manifests Original Love.[507]

The Evagrian notion that love is manifested and exemplified by the Logos incarnate suggests that humans express their love by imitating Christ. To love is to live in accordance with the Lord's teaching. To love implies an existence guided by gentleness. Borrowing from the Gospel passage "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Mt 11:28-29), Evagrius establishes a close connection between the gentle heart of devout Christians and the gentle heart of the Lord. By imitating Christ and his charitable deeds, humans progressively assimilate to the image according to which they were fashioned:

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[503] Bunge (1986), p. 130.

[504] Evagrius, *Monachos* 3, in Driscoll (2003), p. 41.

[505] Evagrius, *Ep* 56.3, cited in Driscoll (2005), p. 42; Bunge (1986), p. 272.

[506] Evagrius, *EM* 12-14, in Casiday (2006), p. 67.

[507] Evagrius, *Ep* 40.3, in Bunge (1986), p. 255.

> If you imitate Christ, you will become blessed. Your soul will die his death, and it will not derive evil from its flesh. Instead, your exodus will be like the exodus of a star, and your resurrection will glow like the sun.[508]

For Evagrius, the imitation of divine love and gentleness is the defining characteristic of the blessed. Indeed, it is better to be "a gentle worldly man than an irascible and wrathful monk."[509] Love and gentleness mark the true disciple of Christ. They are at the heart of the mystical life:

> One who does not possess kindness and love towards his brother, how could he be a member of Christ-bearing love? When a brother visits you during your intense fast and practice of stillness, do not accept the odiousness of thoughts that suggest disturbance of your stillness and interruption of your fast. . . . Let us not speak of the frequent visits of the brothers as disturbances, but rather let us trust their community as a helpful alliance against the phalanx of the adversary; for thus united by the charm of charity, we shall expel wickedness and transfer the world of manual labor into the treasury of hospitality.[510]

Like Aphrahat, who so poignantly establishes the superiority of neighborly charity over formal prayer,[511] Evagrius suggests that compassion and gentleness rather than the strict observance of ascetical practices enable humans to model themselves after Christ and to attain knowledge of God: "Out of gentleness, knowledge is born."[512] The gentle heart sees God.[513] Evagrius proposes that this teaching is epitomized by Moses, he who was more gentle and humble than anyone else on earth (Num 12:3) and who was therefore permitted to speak to God face to face, as though to a friend (Ex 33:11).[514]

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[508] Evagrius, *Monachos* 21, in Driscoll (2003), p. 44.
[509] Evagrius, *Monachos* 34, in Driscoll (2003), p. 47.
[510] Evagrius, *Eul* 24.25, in Sinkewicz (2003), p. 51.
[511] Aphrahat, *Dem* 4.14, in Brock (1987), p. 20.
[512] Evagrius, *Monachos* 99, in Driscoll (2003), p. 58.
[513] Bunge (1986), p. 137.
[514] Evagrius, *Ep* 27.2, in Bunge (1986), p. 239.

Evagrius is well aware that communal existence holds numerous challenges. He knows that "it is not possible to love all the brothers equally."[515] Since the demons never cease to scheme against the soul, the struggle to act kindly toward the neighbor continues until death.[516] Even so, the theologian does not waver in his emphasis on the importance of communal living. The relational context of Christian life provides the setting in which ascetics meet the challenges of day-to-day existence. Only by facing these challenges and by committing to a life of charity can the heart be transformed:

> If your brother irritates you, lead him into your house, and do not hesitate to go into his, but eat your morsel with him. For doing this, you will deliver your soul and there will be no stumbling block for you at the hour of prayer.[517]
>
> He who is merciful to the poor destroys irascibility, and he who cares for them will be filled with good things.[518]
>
> He who does not care for the sick will not see the light.[519]
>
> If your brother is sad, console him; and if he is pained, share the pain. For doing thus, you will gladden his heart, and you will store a great treasure in heaven.[520]

Following Origen's lead, Evagrius also insists that the sanctified Christian must share in the angels' work of mediation by praying for fellow humans, by aiding them in their spiritual struggle, and by seeking their cure.[521] Spiritual progress entails responsibility for the neighbor:

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[515] Evagrius, *Prak* 100, in Sinkewicz (2003), p. 113.
[516] Evagrius, *Prak* 36, in Sinkewicz (2003), p. 104.
[517] Evagrius, *Monachos* 15, in Driscoll (20039, p. 43.
[518] Evagrius, *Monachos* 30, in Driscoll (2003), p. 46.
[519] Evagrius, *Monachos* 77, in Driscoll (2003), p. 54.
[520] Evagrius, *Monachos* 87, in Driscoll (2003), p. 56.
[521] Dysinger (2005), p. 45.

> It is right to pray not only for your own purification, but also for that of all your fellow men, and so to imitate the angels.[522]
>
> Whoever will have obtained spiritual knowledge will help the holy angels and will return reasoning souls from vice to virtue and from ignorance to knowledge.[523]
>
> We should honour our elders like the angels, for it is they who anoint us for the struggles and who heal the wounds inflicted by the wild beasts.[524]

Ascetics who are no longer in the throes of passion, who can discern the spiritual nature of creation, and who have attained the state of pure prayer have at their disposal the means to serve as physicians and teachers to members of the community. If Christ, the divine Physician, "corrects our incensive power through acts of compassion, [and] purifies the intellect through prayer,"[525] Christians who have been formed according to the new Adam seek to facilitate the spiritual advancement of their contemporaries in much the same way.

Evagrius' emphasis on the primacy of love and on its manifestation through acts of charity, healing, and instruction invites comparison with ascetical teachings presented by Origen and by fourth century Syrian Christians. For all of these theologians, the mystical life is closely linked to active service and ethical conduct. Neighborly love is an important means of experiencing contact with Divinity. For Evagrius, it is better to be "the thousandth in love than one alone with hate in inaccessible caves."[526]

Likewise reminiscent of Origen and theologians of the early Syrian church is Evagrius' commitment to the use of ecclesial and liturgical imagery, especially as it is expressed in the Old Testament language of Exodus (Ex 19, 24). The theologian makes repeated use, for example, of the account describing the theophany at Sinai,

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[522] Evagrius, *Prayer* 40, in *Philokalia* 1, p. 60.
[523] Evagrius, *GC* 6.90, cited in Dysinger, p. 45.
[524] Evagrius, *Prak* 100, in Sinkewicz (2003), p. 113.
[525] Evagrius, *Disc* 3, in *Philokalia* 1, p. 40.
[526] Evagrius, *Monachos* 9, in Driscoll (2003), p. 42.

an account greatly influenced by biblical temple imagery and paradigmatic of descriptions relating God's revelation to humankind.[527] In the following passage, reference to the *nous* as a sacred space which shines like a sapphire is a clear borrowing from Exodus 24:10:

> When the intellect has shed its fallen state and acquired the state of grace, then during prayer it will see its own nature like a sapphire or the colour of heaven. In Scripture this is called the realm of God that was seen by the elders on Mount Sinai.[528]

The above words indicate Evagrius' wish to interiorize the biblical glory tradition.[529] So, too, do various other passages throughout his corpus in which he reinterprets the temple motif by pointing to the pure mind (or, as discussed, the pure heart) as God's earthly dwelling-place. The mind is the new Christian temple:

> From the holy David we have learned clearly what the place of God is; for he says, 'His place has been established in peace and his dwelling on Sion' (Ps. 75:3). Therefore, the place of God is the rational soul, and his dwelling the luminous mind that has renounced worldly desires and has been taught to observe the reasons of (that which is on) the earth.[530]
>
> The mind is the temple of the Holy Trinity.[531]
>
> The pure mind is an incense burner at the time of prayer when it touches upon no sensible object. According to virtue we will

[527] Golitzin (1994), p. 155.

[528] Evagrius, *Disc* 18, in *Philokalia* 1, p. 49.

[529] As pointed out by Séd, Evagrius is one of the first Christian theologians to interiorize the encounter of Moses and the elders with God on Mount Sinai; see Nicolas Séd, "La Shekinta et ses amis arameens," *Cahiers d'Orientalisme* XX (Geneva: P. Cramer, 1988), pp. 240-242.

[530] Evagrius, *GC* 25, in Sinkewicz (2003), p. 213.

[531] Evagrius, *GC* 34, in Sinkewicz (2003), p. 214.

> be one on the eighth day, according to knowledge, on the last day.[532]
>
> With a prophetic eye, he saw the rational nature elevated through ascetic struggle and receiving in itself the knowledge of God, since God is said to be 'seated' where he is known and therefore the pure mind is called 'God's throne'.[533]

As we discuss Evagrius' interest in the spiritualization of the temple motif, it bears keeping in mind that he is as committed as Origen and Syrian ascetical writers to the idea that the interiorization of worship does not call into question the importance of the church. While inner prayer allows Christians to commune directly with God, the mystical quest nevertheless depends on the sacramental and communal life provided by the body of Christ. Evagrius' commitment to the church and its representatives is unwavering:

> The one agitating the church of the Lord, fire will completely consume him. The one resisting a priest, the earth will swallow him up.[534]
>
> One should love the priests after the Lord, for they purify us through the sacred mysteries and pray on our behalf.[535]

Despite a deep interest in the interior act of worship, Evagrius situates his teaching within the social dimension of the church. As discussed above, he cannot conceive of the mystical life apart from neighborly love and charitable deeds. The quest for God bears fruit, because members of the body of Christ enter into close, egalitarian relationships with each other:

> By means of these virtues [of compassion, prayer, and fasting], the new Adam is formed, made again according to the image of his Creator—an Adam in whom, thanks to dispassion, there is 'neither male nor female' and, thanks to singleness of faith,

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[532] Evagrius, *GC* 6, in Sinkewicz (2003), p. 211.
[533] Evagrius, *Thoughts* 41, in Casiday (2006), p. 115.
[534] Evagrius, *Monachos* 114, in Driscoll (2003), p. 61.
[535] Evagrius, *Prak* 100, in Sinkewicz (2003), p. 113.

> there is 'neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free; but Christ is all, and in all' (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:10-11).[536]

If Evagrius cannot conceive of the quest for God apart from the church and its constant striving to emulate the peace and equality of the heavenly realm, neither can he envision the mystical journey apart from the physical body. As we turn to examine his notion of human embodiment, we are given the opportunity to consider if the theologian was indeed the crypto-Gnostic he is often made out to be, or if, in fact, he showed considerable interest in the body as a tool of spiritual advancement.[537] To begin with, it is notable that Evagrius does not view the body *per se* as an evil:

> Those who in their wickedness nourish the flesh and 'make provision for it to gratify its desires' (Rom. 13:14)—let them blame themselves and not the flesh. For they know the grace of the Creator, those who have attained impassibility of the soul through this body and perceive to some degree the contemplation of beings.[538]

As suggested in these words, Evagrius advances the idea that the body supports the *nous* in its strivings for perfection rather than sabotages the process.[539] Aided by the body, the intellect attains impassibility, contemplates the nature of the created order, and progresses toward the ultimate goal of knowing God directly. Spiritual progress depends on the body in that its five physical senses provide their immaterial counterparts, the five noetic senses, with metaphors on how to capture realities that are otherwise inaccessible.[540] Noetic sight and hearing are valuable tools for detecting the inner rationale and purpose of created things in the scheme of God's providence. They deliver insight to the *nous* in much the same way in which physical sight and hearing provide a deeper un-

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[536] Evagrius, *Disc* 3, in *Philokalia* 1, p. 40.
[537] Plested (2004), p. 66.
[538] Evagrius, *Prak* 53, in Sinkewicz (2003), p. 107.
[539] McGuckin (2001), pp. 39-40; Plested (2004), p. 66.
[540] Ashbrook Harvey (2006), pp. 171-172.

derstanding of our immediate, material surroundings.[541] Noetic smell and taste, in turn, allow for the detection and savoring of truth, while touch enables the intellect to grasp this truth. The body teaches seekers how to apply principles derived from the material order to the spiritual realm. By paying close attention to bodily sensations, humans can heighten their awareness of noetic sensations. Bodily perceptions allow the intellect to gain a deeper understanding of its own mechanisms, its strengths, and its weaknesses:

> Just as the soul acting through the body perceives the members which are sick, so too the mind in acting with its proper activity recognizes its own powers and through that which hinders it discovers the commandment capable of healing it.[542]

We can discern further evidence of Evagrius' positive stance toward embodiment by taking a closer look at his anthropological teaching. Evagrius proposes that the creation of the cosmos is an act of divine compassion which equips each fallen rational being, each *logikos*, with an environment and a body that corresponds to its degree of self-willed separation from God. All ages, worlds, and bodies exist for the sole purpose of facilitating the return of the *logikos* to God.[543] Together with an appropriate body, rational beings are endowed with two "helpers," *thumos* (incensive power) and *epithumia* (desire), who reign over the lower parts of the soul. Although *thumos* and *epithumia* will overwhelm the body as passions if they are misused or present in access, in an ideal state of interior balance, the former directs its anger at the *logismoi*, while the latter causes the soul to desire virtue and wisdom[544] To this extent, they are therapeutic remedies which, when employed according to nature, assist the *nous* in its mystical ascent. For Evagrius, it is therefore never a matter of quenching the lower aspect of the soul. The goal of *praktike* is to harness the two helpers and to forestall any

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[541] Driscoll (2005), p. 41.

[542] Evagrius, *Prak* 82, in Sinkewicz (2003), p. 111.

[543] Dysinger (2005), pp. 32-33.

[544] Jeremy Driscoll, "*Apatheia* and Purity of Heart in Evagrius Ponticus," in Luckman and Kulzer (1999), p. 145; Dysinger (2005), pp. 30-31; Plested (2004), p. 66.

adverse effect they may have on the natural equilibrium of the body.

Despite appearances, then, Evagrius' conception of the body is truthful to the holistic tenor of Scripture. The theologian insists on the unity of body, soul, and *nous*. The mind is connected to the rational part of the soul while the body, in turn, is linked to the irascible and desiring parts of the soul. If passions, delusions, and vice hold sway over these elements of the soul, this link will affect the body adversely. However, if *thumos* and *epithumia* take on the part for which they were intended and serve as helpers, the body and the soul, no less than the mind, are transformed and granted a place in the Kingdom of Heaven. In the eschaton, "the names and numbers of 'body', 'soul', and 'mind' will pass away since they will be raised to the order of the mind."[545] At this point, all three aspects of human nature will be joined to the nature of their Creator and "by his grace become one with him in all things without end."[546]

The above discussion of the Evagrian notion of the heart, of charity, of communal existence, and of the body repeatedly calls to mind the teachings of Macarius, Evagrius' close contemporary. This matter is worth pondering, especially if we bear in mind that these two theologians are most often singled out to establish the discrepancy between Hellenic and Syrian Christian thought. While the teaching of both men may initially appear markedly different, the above pages have hopefully shown that Evagrius, no less than Macarius, was well acquainted with holistic biblical anthropology and looked to the heart as the locus of divine-human communion. Like Macarius, Evagrius insisted on the need for purity of heart. While the Egyptian theologian resorted primarily to Greek terminology and to the notion of *apatheia* to describe this state, he was as committed as the Syrian ascetic to the idea that the pure, enlarged heart serves as the doorway to knowledge of God.

But similarities between both ascetical doctrines go beyond their mutual reliance on the anthropological teaching of Scripture.

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[545] Evagrius, *EM* 22, in Casiday (2006), p. 68.
[546] Evagrius, *EM* 63, in Casiday (2006), p. 76.

Both men were members of an ascetical community and derived their insights from personal experience. Although Evagrius could be abstract in his outlook and present the mystical quest in terms of the stripping of the intellect to its pure, original state, he situated his doctrine within a communal, embodied context. Like Macarius, Evagrius viewed the quest for perfection as inherently relational. Knowledge of God and neighborly love were closely linked. Only a virtuous, charitable heart was able to discern the teachings of the Lord. Only if a person was gentle and committed to the imitation of Christ could the innermost self be transformed into a divine shrine. Just as the external altar, the inner altar of the heart was to be approached by Christians who had been reconciled with their neighbors.

The idea that seekers divorce themselves from the world to establish communion with Divinity was thus foreign to Evagrius' thinking. Foreign, too, was the notion that the body posed an obstacle to the divine quest. As God's creation, Evagrius deemed it inherently good. Like Origen and Macarius, he suggested that untoward behavior had its source not in the soul's earthly vessel but rather in evil thoughts that ignited uncontrollable passions. Mind, soul, and body formed an integral whole. Together they strove for perfection and the sanctification of human nature.

Evagrius' œuvre is a source of inspiration in many respects—today no less than in past centuries. His understanding of the human psyche has lost little of its relevance and provides contemporary Christians with valuable information on how to cultivate divine-human relations. Evagrius' emphasis on the conquest of inflammatory thoughts and on the attainment of dispassion by means of self-awareness encourages today's seekers to embrace mindfulness as a powerful tool to transformation and inner peace. His advice to look beyond the surface of reality to detect its deep, underlying nature resonates strongly with meditational practices adopted by modern individuals in the hope of arriving at a state of consciousness which reveals to them the fundamental interrelatedness of human existence. Of lasting interest, too, is Evagrius' concept of pure prayer and his timeless insight that God is experienced beyond thought and imagery. Like fellow early Christian theologians, Evagrius believed that God is apprehended viscerally and that the

path leading up to this experience has its beginning in the tangible, interactive here and now.

4 THE EARLY BYZANTINE SYNTHESIS

DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE

With Dionysius the Areopagite, we encounter a major theologian and synthesizer of the early Christian tradition. Dionysius was greatly influenced by Neoplatonic teaching yet articulated a doctrine that was deeply Christian in its outlook.[547] He was at home in the Syrian ascetical milieu and, at the same time, intimately acquainted with Origen's legacy. The Dionysian corpus, which numbers four relatively short treatises, *The Divine Names*, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, *Mystical Theology*, as well as some letters,[548] reveals its author's ability to draw on diverse teachings without undermining the coherence of his system. Philosophical elucidation goes hand in hand with a deep awareness of the need to live the Christian message experientially.[549] Teachings on God's immanence in creation are gracefully joined to the belief in God's utter transcendence. Divine radiance and glory do not render void the reality of divine darkness.

Little can be said about the author of these early Christian texts, an unknown Syrian priest-ascetic who chose to circulate his writings under the pseudonym of Dionysius the Areopagite, a companion and disciple of St. Paul in Athens.[550] It is commonly accepted that the writings, which first gained attention when used

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[547] Louth (1989), p. 21.

[548] For a commentary on each of these texts, see Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[549] Louth (1989), p. 25.

[550] McGuckin (2004b), v.s. "Dionysius the Areopagite," p. 104.

by Cyrilline theologians who rejected the Chalcedonian decree to argue their case in 532,[551] belong to the end of the fifth or the beginning of the sixth century. They were edited in the middle of the sixth century by John of Scythopolis, from which point onward they exerted a lasting influence on subsequent theologians. In the Christian East, they were greatly esteemed by ascetical writers, such as Maximus the Confessor and Andrew of Crete. In the West, the *Corpus Areopagiticum* was embraced, among others, by Pope Gregory the Great, John Scotus Eriugena, Bonaventure, and Albert the Great. It provided a powerful contribution to the later medieval mystical revival and left a permanent mark on teachings, such as those presented in the *Cloud of Unknowing* and in the writings of the Rhineland mystics.[552]

Notable about the author of this body of work is his familiarity with and enthusiasm for a strand of Neoplatonism closely associated with the fifth century Academy in Athens, run for much of the century by its foremost representative Proclus (410-85). Since the similarities between Dionysian and Procline teachings are striking indeed, they call for a brief introductory discussion.

As we have seen, Dionysius was by no means the first early Christian theologian to draw on Greek philosophical concepts. Platonic currents are prominent in the works of Origen as well as Evagrius, and even the writings of the Syrian ascetic Macarius harbor an intellectual-immaterial element that owes much to Plato. The tradition of "Christian Platonism" is long indeed and can be traced from late antique Alexandria, to the Asia Minor of the Cappadocians, and on into the end of the Byzantine period.[553]

A first teaching that is of Neoplatonic inspiration is the Dionysian circular conception of procession, return, and rest, which originates with Proclus' prominent motif of triadic development. Paying close attention to the central philosophical problem of the

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[551] Louth (1989), p. 75.

[552] For an introductory discussion of Dionysius' influence on the medieval West, see Jean Leclercq, "Influence and noninfluence of Dionysius in the Western Middle Ages," in Luibheid (1987), pp. 25-32.

[553] Golitzin (1999a), p. 15.

relationship between the One and the many, Proclus pointed to the former, the First Cause, as the source whence the multiplicity of beings proceed "as branches from a root."[554] The procession of beings from the One, he resumed, numbers three moments of development, (i) remaining in the original principle, (ii) proceeding out of the principle, and (iii) turning back towards the principle. In every being that proceeds forth from the hypostasis above, Proclus discerned a natural tendency to turn back toward the immediate source of emanation.[555]

Dionysius embraced the idea of a development in three movements and the basic Neoplatonic premise that the proceeding forth and turning back to the One are facilitated by a scale of being, in which lower hypostases depend on the mediating activity of higher hypostases. However, as a Christian and a firm believer that God alone is the source of being, he insisted that being itself cannot derive from a stream of emanated hypostases. Since being is created directly by God, dependence on higher hypostases is of significance only with regard to the principle of illumination. Like being, light and knowledge derive from the One. Unlike being, they are not bestowed immediately by God but are communicated by a downward-moving procession. As each hypostasis is illuminated by preceding hypostases, it transmits its own radiance to beings lower in the hierarchy.[556]

Proclus suggested that the process of turning back toward the One is greatly enhanced by the application of theurgy.[557] While Plotinus, the founder of Neoplatonism, had argued that the only activity by which humans can return from multiplicity to unity is contemplation, his successor, Proclus, believed that theurgical

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[554] Copleston (1993), p. 479.

[555] Copleston (1993), p. 479.

[556] Louth (1989), p. 85.

[557] Proclus is said to have distinguished between various types of theurgy. The lower type seems to have involved the invocation of gods by means of plants, stones, and animals which were supposed to be sympathetic to the gods invoked. A higher form of theurgy was of a more spiritual nature and involved the recitation of hymns and prayers. For a discussion of Procline theurgy, see Anne Sheppard, "Proclus' Attitude to Theurgy," *Classical Quarterly* 32 (1982): 211-224.

power rather than human wisdom is more likely to induce such a process.[558]

Dionysius embraced this Neoplatonic doctrine yet recontextualized Proclus' concept of *theourgia* by placing it within a Christian context. For him, the term theurgy referred to the sacraments, i.e. to sensible symbols which facilitate the gathering-together of the many to the One by serving as vehicles of grace. Dionysius did not believe in an inherent occult sympathy between material elements and the spiritual realm. Unlike the theurgical Neoplatonists, he denied that physical objects *per se* invite divine-human communication.[559] Theurgy, as he envisioned it, was not concerned with works addressed by humans to the gods. Christian theurgy referred to God's salvific acts and, specifically, to the incarnation, the quintessential act of salvation.[560] It implied the reenactment and celebration of these acts during the liturgy and the manifestation of their transformative effect among members of the congregation. Christian theurgy allowed humans to reverse the movement from unity to fragmentation and to be reassembled around the throne of God. Dionysius elaborated on his theurgical teaching by insisting that the process of returning to unity with the One depended on the strict enforcement of a triadic hierarchical order, a concept he once again borrowed from Proclus.

The division of the cosmos into triads suffuses Procline teaching. Taking as his starting point Plotinus' three hypostases, the One, Intelligence, and Soul, Proclus suggested that replicas issue from each hypostasis: from the One—*henads* or gods, from Intelligence—intelligences, that is, daemons or angels, and from Soul—souls.[561] Dionysius reworked these three levels of reality by proposing three triadic arrangements, consisting of the Thearchy, the ce-

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[558] Golitzin (1999a), p. 5; Louth (1981), p. 162; Paul Rorem, *Biblical and Liturgical Symbols within the Pseudo-Dionysian Synthesis* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984), p. 106. Proclus expresses this notion in *Platonic Theology* 1.25; see Proclus, *Platonic Theology*, ed. H. D. Saffrey and L. G. Westerink (Paris: Vrin, 1968), p. 113.

[559] Louth (1981), p. 163-164.

[560] Rorem (1984), pp. 14-15.

[561] Louth (1981), p. 163.

lestial hierarchy, and the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The Thearchy is the Trinity. The second hierarchical order, the celestial hierarchy, numbers the seraphim, cherubim, and thrones among the highest of its three orders. The second rank of this heavenly arrangement consists of the dominions, powers, and authorities, while the third rank comprises the principalities, archangels, and angels. Dionysius discussed his understanding of this hierarchical order in *The Celestial Hierarchy*, a work in which he also presented a complex method for the interpretation of religious symbols, specifically for the interpretation of biblical symbols, angelic names, and divine names.[562]

In his description of the hierarchy to which humans belong, the earthly or ecclesiastical hierarchy, Dionysius once again distinguished three levels of gradation, the highest level featuring the sacraments, the intermediate level featuring the ministers, and the last level numbering those to whom the latter minister. Analogous to the ranks of the celestial hierarchy, he subdivided each level into a further triad, conceiving of the three sacraments in terms of baptism, the Eucharist, and the sacrament of oil. The three orders of clergy comprise the hierarchs, priests, and deacons, while the last level of the ecclesiastical hierarchy features the monks, the communicants or "sacred people," and those who have yet to be initiated or who have spoilt their initiation, the catechumens and penitents. Dionysius elucidated this triadic arrangement in *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, a work which, given its content, provided him with the opportunity to present a systematic interpretation of Christianity's main rites and a discussion of the clergy.

Dionysius' reliance on Proclus' triadic systematization does not end here. Drawing on the triad of purification, illumination, and perfection, a triad which, as we have seen in our discussions of Origen and Evagrius, has antecedents in the Christian tradition, Dionysius discerned a fundamental rhythm which allows God to draw the whole of the created order back into divine union. By suggesting that, in every hierarchy, the highest rank either perfects or is being perfected, the middle rank illuminates or is being illuminated, and the lowest order purifies or is being purified,[563] he pre-

[562] Rorem (1993), p. 49.
[563] Louth (1989), pp. 40-41.

sented a carefully laid out chain of interdependent beings that facilitates progressive assimilation to God. Commenting on the three ranks of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, Dionysius proposed that the highest order, the order of the rites, is inherently perfecting in nature. The clergy, the middle rank, fulfills the function of illumination; it enlightens beings of the lowest rank, the laity, who require purification, and readies them for the reception of the mysteries.[564] The same principle holds true for each individual triad. Taking a look at the lowest human triad, we find that the monks are in the process of being perfected. The "sacred people" are being illuminated, while the lowest order, which consists of individuals awaiting their initiation, undergoes purification.

If the principle of subdivision applies to the lowest triad of the human hierarchy, it is applicable also to the highest triad of the celestial hierarchy: the seraphim, the "carriers of warmth" who have the ability to stamp their own image on subordinates and to arouse in them an equal measure of warmth, represent perfection.[565] The cherubim, who have the power to know and to see God and who bestow on their inferiors the gift of wisdom, exemplify the spiritual principle of illumination. The thrones, in turn, transcend every earthly defect and, being wholly pure, represent purification.

Dionysius greatly believed in the value of creation's hierarchical arrangement and placed this concept at the center of his teaching. This being the case, he nevertheless insisted that the threefold progression of purification, illumination, and perfection cannot be accomplished without divine intervention. A person's assimilation to God and deification depend, ultimately, on the gracious movement of Divinity toward the created order.

The above discussion of Neoplatonic teachings adopted by Dionysius, while brief, has allowed us to see that the theologian was greatly influenced by philosophy and by Neoplatonism in particular. The Procline doctrine of procession and return was ever on his mind. So, too, was the closely related notion of mediation and

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[564] Louth (1981), p. 171.

[565] Dionysius, *CH* 7.1, in Luibheid (1987), pp. 161-162.

its underlying premise that "like is known by like," an established Greek philosophical maxim. Although Dionysius never quoted from Plato or his successors, he frequently alluded to them in his works.[566] Dionysius was not adverse to the rational inquiry into the nature of the divine realm and the systematization of acquired insight. The theological tradition, he proposed, has a dual aspect and draws on philosophy and the method of demonstration to come to a better understanding of Divinity. It "uses persuasion and imposes the truthfulness of what is asserted."[567]

This having been said, it is important to note that Dionysius aligned himself with a school of Platonic thought that, unlike earlier exponents, echoed his own belief by questioning the soul's inherent ability to ascend to the One. As suggested above, Proclus had little faith in contemplation as a means of bolstering the inherent weakness of the soul sufficiently to allow for participation in the divine realm.[568] He looked to theurgy as a far more powerful instrument of mystical ascent. Dionysius adopted this Procline feature while placing it within the context of God's deep love for creation. He suggested that Christian theurgical rites bear witness to this love by manifesting God's saving acts. Dionysius never wavered in his conviction that Divinity actively searches for humankind and seeks to win back all who have lost their sense of divine origin.[569] God's love suffuses the universe and is the all-pervasive force behind the soul's return to the One. Citing his spiritual father Hierotheus, the theologian suggests the unifying power of divine love in the following passage:

> From the same writer and work [*Hymns of Love*]: Come, let us gather all these once more together into a unity and let us say that there is a simple self-moving power directing all things to mingle as one, that it starts out from the Good, reaches down to the lowliest creation, returns then in due order through all the stages back to the Good, and thus turns from itself and

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[566] Louth (1989), p. 21.
[567] Dionysius, *Ep* 9.1, in Luibheid (1987), p. 283.
[568] Golitzin (1999a), p. 5.
[569] Louth (1989), p. 108.

> through itself and upon itself and toward itself in an everlasting circle.[570]

Dionysius conveys the idea that God's love is the driving force behind everything that pertains to the created order with still greater force in these words:

> And, in truth, it must be said too that the very cause of the universe in the beautiful, good superabundance of his benign yearning for all is also carried outside of himself in the loving care he has for everything. He is, as it were, beguiled by goodness, by love, and by yearning and is enticed away from his transcendent dwelling place and comes to abide within all things, and he does so by virtue of his supernatural and ecstatic capacity to remain, nevertheless, within himself.[571]

If Dionysius is emphatic that our being is caused by the outreach of God's boundless love, he is equally emphatic that humans cannot conceive of this love intellectually. Divine love has to be experienced; it has to be suffered. Inspired once again by Hierotheus, Dionysius draws on his mentor's account of union with God to elucidate this aspect of his mystical teaching. While education and biblical studies have a distinct place in the life of the Christian, the encounter with God calls for experiential knowledge:

> I have said enough about this elsewhere and my famous teacher has marvelously praised in his *Elements of Theology* whatever he learned directly from the sacred writers, whatever his own perspicacious and laborious research of the scriptures uncovered for him, or whatever was made known to him through more mysterious inspiration, not only learning but also experiencing the divine things. For he had a "sympathy" with such matters, if I may express it this way, and he was perfected in a mysterious union with them and in a faith in them which was independent of any education.[572]

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[570] Dionysius, *DN* 4.17, in Luibheid (1987), p. 84.
[571] Dionysius, *DN* 4.13, in Luibheid (1987), p. 82.
[572] Dionysius, *DN* 2.9, in Luibheid (1987), p. 65.

Union with God is attained by a passive process which presupposes, in Dionysius' words, a certain "sympathy" with divine things and the willingness to surrender to their impact. While humans can acquire knowledge of God in part through intellectual strivings and the study of Scripture, the process of drawing close to Divinity depends, ultimately, on an untaught, visceral experience. At the final stage of the return to the One, seekers deliver themselves into the arms of God. Like Hierotheus, who "was so caught up, so taken out of himself, experiencing communion with the things praised, that everyone who heard him, everyone who saw him . . . considered him to be inspired,"[573] humans become vessels of Divinity. They know an ecstasy that defies rational inquiry. Christians who undergo such an experience bear witness to the second aspect of the theological tradition, the ineffable aspect, which "puts souls firmly in the presence of God"[574] and which, unlike rational inquiry, resorts to symbolism to convey, in some small measure, the incomprehensible nature of Divinity.

To the extent to which Dionysius emphasizes the experiential nature of the encounter with God, he seems particularly at home in the Syrian ascetical tradition, and we will have occasion to consider his place within this tradition further as we examine the liturgical conception of his mystical doctrine. For now, however, let us recall that Dionysius, while heir to the teachings of Aphrahat, Ephrem, and Macarius, was also intimately acquainted with the works of Origen and Evagrius, two theologians who, in their own right, were esteemed for a teaching on the experiential, heart-felt encounter with God. Dionysius' emphasis on the struggle against the passions, on the acquisition of virtue, and on the attainment of *apatheia* as preconditions for knowledge of God is strongly reminiscent of Evagrius' ascetical doctrine. Likewise reminiscent of his predecessor's teaching is the Dionysian call for singleness of life and for undistracted, imageless prayer.

Given these similarities, it is worth our time to explore Dionysius' doctrine on the ascetical life and its debt to Evagrian teaching

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[573] Dionysius, *DN* 3.2, in Luibheid (1987), p. 70.
[574] Dionysius, *Ep* 9.1, in Luibheid (1987), p. 283.

more closely. How does Dionysius envision the threefold movement toward God? In which instances is he most influenced by his Egyptian predecessor? What is his understanding of the deifying union with God, a union which, as we have already seen, is characterized by the surrender to God's intoxicating love?

For Dionysius, the ascetical life and the dynamic movement toward God begins with seekers' ability to become aware of their sinful state of existence and with the fervent wish to overcome vice.[575] A catechumen who aspires to divine unity must have "duly examined with unbiased gaze what he himself is" [576] and avoid the dark pits of ignorance. Dionysius presents his understanding of the purifying process for the most part in a discussion of the laity and its lowest order in *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy.* In it, he draws attention to the dangers of succumbing to the influence of demonic forces. These forces, he cautions his audience, lure catechumens away from the truly real and enslave them to pleasures which die and corrupt.[577] Dionysius notes repeatedly that the ascetical life is characterized by the ceaseless attempt to oppose whatever may sunder communion with the One.[578] Like Evagrius, he believes that this implies a lifelong battle which ends only at death.[579]

In the theologian's eighth letter, in which he further expounds on the ascetical struggle, he argues that an existence dominated by God's adversaries annihilates a person's inner, divine order. This order is maintained by the rule of reason over inferior and potentially destructive impulses, primarily anger and desire:

> Therefore, how could we avoid being ashamed as we witness reason harmed by anger and desire, when we see it driven from the authority given to it by God so that in an unholy and un-

[575] Walther Völker, *Kontemplation und Ekstase bei Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1958), p. 54.

[576] Dionysius, *EH* 2.3.4, in Luibheid (1987), p. 206.

[577] Dionysius, *EH* 3.3.7, in Luibheid (1987), p. 216.

[578] Dionysius, *EH* 2.3.5, in Luibheid (1987), p. 206.

[579] Dionysius, *EH* 7.3.8, in Luibheid (1987), p. 257.

> just manner trouble, discord, and disorder are stirred up in us?[580]

Dionysius is not as detailed and systematic in his description of the ascetical life as Evagrius.[581] Nevertheless, his commitment to the transcendence of discord and disorder is lasting. Like Evagrius, he conveys a strong sense of the necessity to acquire virtue, above all, meekness, mercy, and love. Dionysius, too, suggests that Moses earned a sight of God because of his great meekness.[582] David was loved by God, because he was good, even to his enemies. Job was justified because he remained aloof from all wrongdoing, while Joseph found favor with God for not taking revenge on the brothers who betrayed him.[583] Dionysius' teaching on the virtuous life culminates with his call to look beyond even the gentleness of sacred people and the generosity of the angels toward Christ himself, whose many deeds of love set the ultimate standard by which Christians are to measure themselves. Christ revealed to humankind how to be kind to the ungrateful and how to make the sun rise on those who are evil.[584] Dionysius encourages all Christians who seek union with God to follow the Lord's example tirelessly.

The ability to defy evil and to attain virtue introduces mystical seekers to a state of being in which they are no longer assailed by the adversary. Dionysius follows Evagrius in referring to this state as the state of *apatheia*:

> He [the man who is divine] will rebuff them [the illusions or the terrors of the adversary] and chase them away if they come on the scene. He will be more active than passive. Having adopted impassibility and endurance as the guiding norm of

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[580] Dionysius, *Ep* 8.3, in Luibheid (1987), p. 275.

[581] Völker (1958), p. 59.

[582] Dionysius, *Ep* 8.1, in Luibheid (1987), p. 269.

[583] Dionysius, *Ep* 8.1, in Luibheid (1987), p. 270.

[584] Dionysius, *Ep* 8.1, in Luibheid (1987), p. 271. For the importance of *Imitatio Christi* in the Dionysian corpus, see Völker (1958), esp. pp. 54-59.

> his state he will be seen, like a doctor, helping others who are possessed by these things.[585]

The successful redirection and transformation of the passions allow the blessed to lead an existence "which excludes all distraction and enables them to achieve a singular mode of life conforming to God and open to the perfection of God's love."[586] *Apatheia* denotes "the renunciation of all activities and of all phantasies which could lead to a distracted living."[587] Dionysius suggests that members of the monastic order, the highest rank of the laity, exemplify the principle of impassibility, for they have been purified and illuminated to such a degree as to lead a life wholly focused on God.[588] The singleness of their concentration and existence sets an example for all seekers to emulate.

The Dionysian understanding that *apatheia* introduces ascetics to a state of undistracted meditation of God invites comparison to Evagrius' notion of pure prayer, an inner state in which the mind has been stripped of all thoughts, images, and concepts and is so pure as to contemplate God directly. Although Dionysius has far less to say on the subject of prayer than Evagrius, he nevertheless impresses on his audience the need for "prayers that are holy"[589] and that are offered "with untroubled mind."[590] By offering such prayers, Christians are "uplifted in a sacred fashion toward the ultimate perfection of the Deity."[591] Like Evagrius, Dionysius thus believes that the purification and stilling of the mind and its deep absorption in God are the quintessential means of attaining mystical union. While Dionysius does not refer explicitly to the biblical notion of the pure heart or to the concept of the heart as the site of personal unity and spiritual worship, his understanding that only holy, or pure, prayer will raise humans into the presence of God resonates strongly with teachings on inner prayer discussed in pre-

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[585] Dionysius, *EH* 3.3.7, in Luibheid (1987), p. 216.
[586] Dionysius, *EH* 6.1.3, in Luibheid (1987), p. 244.
[587] Dionysius, *EH* 6.3.2, in Luibheid (1987), p. 247.
[588] Dionysius, *EH* 6.1.3, in Luibheid (1987), p. 245.
[589] Dionysius, *DN* 3.1.1, in Luibheid (1987), p. 68.
[590] Dionysius, *DN* 3.1.1, in Luibheid (1987), p. 68.
[591] Dionysius, *DN* 2.3.5, in Luibheid (1987), p. 207.

vious chapters. Only if the mind, or the heart, has been sufficiently calmed and a person's inherent inner order reestablished, can Christians hope to be lifted toward the "kindly Rays of God."[592]

If the Evagrian and Dionysian notions of prayer are similar in many respects, so are their respective understandings of the encounter with God. As we have just seen, both theologians agree that God lies beyond concepts that imprint the mind. They are in accord that the perception of God takes place in a realm that escapes human comprehension. Evagrius, for his part, writes that "the mind could not see the place of God in itself, unless it had become loftier than all [concepts of] things."[593] Dionysius focuses even more on the ineffable nature of God and, informed by Hierotheus' teaching, describes the experience of divine union as a deeply mysterious event in which the intellect is taken out of itself.[594] According to Dionysius, the intellect relinquishes all control and any hold over that which is familiar and surrenders to the loving outreach of Deity. It enters a state in which it belongs no longer to itself but to God.[595] It is "lifted upward to that brilliance above, to the dazzling light of those beams"[596] and "suffers" unity with the One.

Similar to Evagrius, who conceives of pure prayer as a state in which the mind beholds the light of the Trinity,[597] Dionysius pays much attention to the radiant nature of Divinity. Unlike Evagrius, however, he proposes that heavenly light is so bright as to blind the eye of the mind. Christians who draw close to God are enfolded by the dark rays of Glory and enter darkness:[598]

> Trinity!! Higher than any being, any divinity, any goodness! Guide of Christians in the wisdom of heaven! Lead us up beyond unknowing and light, up to the farthest, highest peak of mystic scripture, where the mysteries of God's Word lie sim-

[592] Dionysius, *DN* 3.1, in Luibheid (1987), p. 68.
[593] Evagrius, *Thoughts* 40, in Casiday (2006), p. 114.
[594] Dionysius, *DN* 3.2, in Luibheid (1987), p. 70.
[595] Dionysius, *DN* 4.13, in Luibheid (1987), p. 82.
[596] Dionysius, *DN* 3.1, in Luibheid (1987), p. 68.
[597] Evagrius, *Thoughts* 39, 42, in Casiday (2006), pp. 114, 116.
[598] Louth (1989), p. 107.

> ple, absolute and unchangeable in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence. Amid the deepest shadow they pour overwhelming light on what is most manifest. Amid the wholly unsensed and unseen they completely fill our sightless minds with treasures beyond all beauty.[599]

In his exposition of the motif of divine darkness, Dionysius pays careful attention to the biblical account of Moses as he ascends Mount Sinai. Indeed, the patriarch's ascent of the mountain and entrance into ever deeper darkness is the primary means by which Dionysius explicates his doctrine of the way of negation, or apophaticism. It is a concept for which he is much renowned, and, given its lasting impact on Christian mystical thought, it is of interest to cite this Dionysian teaching at some length:

> It is not for nothing that the blessed Moses is commanded to submit first to purification and then to depart from those who have not undergone this. When every purification is complete, he hears the many-voiced trumpets. He sees the many lights, pure and with rays streaming abundantly. Then, standing apart from the crowds and accompanied by chosen priests, he [Moses] pushes ahead to the summit of the divine ascents. And yet he does not meet God himself, but contemplates, not him who is invisible, but rather where he dwells. This means, I presume, that the holiest and highest of the things perceived with the eye of the body or the mind are but the rationale which presupposes all that lies below the Transcendent One. Through them, however, his unimaginable presence is shown, walking the heights of those holy places to which the mind at least can rise. But then he [Moses] breaks free of them, away from what sees and is seen, and he plunges into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing. Here, renouncing all that the mind may conceive, wrapped entirely in the intangible and the invisible, he belongs completely to him who is beyond everything. Here, being neither oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united to the completely unknown by an inactivity of

[599] Dionysius, *MT* 1.1, in Luibheid (1987), p. 135.

> all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing.[600]

We can learn much from the above passage. Its concluding lines confirm our observation that Dionysius conceives of divine union as an experience characterized by surrender, unknowing, and deep mystery. Guided to the pinnacle of the divine journey by God's yearning for the created order and having laid aside all human comprehension, the soul enters the "mysterious darkness of unknowing" and delivers itself into the arms of the Beloved.

From the above citation, we can also gain insight into Dionysius' views on an earlier phase of the return to God, a phase during which Moses contemplates Deity's dwelling-place and the many things through which its "unimaginable presence is shown." This phase is characterized by cataphatic theology or the way of affirmation. Unlike apopathic theology, which is concerned with a state in which human speech and thought fail to describe the divine encounter,[601] cataphatic theology invests in affirmative declarative statements about God. These statements can be made because Divinity is present to us through all created things to which the mind can rise. By means of cataphatic theology, it is possible to describe the beauty and glory of Deity as they manifest themselves throughout the cosmos. While the way of negation, by virtue of denying qualities of God, presents the truest possible way of referring to the Ineffable and is more fundamental than the way of affirmation, the latter approach raises human awareness to the inherent goodness and splendor of the created order. By doing so, it initiates the movement back into the presence of God. It marks the first step away from multiplicity to unity.

The above citation invites one further observation. As indicated whilst previewing Dionysian mystical thought in the introduction of this study, the account of Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai features a number of liturgical echoes.[602] After his initial purification, the patriarch separates himself from the crowd and climbs the

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[600] Dionysius, *MT* 1.3, in Luibheid (1987), pp. 136-7.
[601] Louth (1981), p. 165.
[602] Louth (1989), p. 101.

mountain accompanied by chosen priests in much the same way in which the hierarch is purified and then approaches the altar with his priests. Just as the liturgy progresses from the first part devoted to the readings of Scripture to the hidden consecration in the sanctuary, Moses passes from "what sees and is seen" into the darkness of the hidden God. These liturgical echoes are of considerable importance for a better understanding of Dionysius' mystical doctrine, and enable us to consider the role he attributes to the church in the life of the seeker. Liturgical echoes strongly suggest that the church, that is, the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and its sacraments are the means by which Christians ascend the holy mountain and enter the darkness that reveals to them the presence of God. After a number of preliminary comments on the Dionysian understanding of hierarchy, we will turn our attention to the exploration of this particular feature.

In Dionysian thought, the celestial and ecclesiastical hierarchies are of great importance for revealing to humankind the glory of Divinity. They are instruments of theophany. As active mediators of divine light, love, and knowledge, they call back to unity all beings who have been sundered from God. Dionysius articulates his conception of hierarchy in the following passage:

> In my opinion a hierarchy is a sacred order, a state of understanding and an activity approximating as closely as possible to the divine. . . . It reaches out to grant every being, according to merit, a share of light and then through a divine sacrament, in harmony and in peace, it bestows on each of those being perfected its own form.[603]

Far from curtailing a person's possibility of establishing direct communion with God, the concept of hierarchy, as envisioned by Dionysius, provides humans with the opportunity to participate directly in the light and likeness of God. For the sixth century theologian, the hierarchical arrangement of the created order does not imply exclusion and division, a viewpoint modern readers may tend

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[603] Dionysius, *CH* 3.1, in Luibheid (1987), pp. 153-154.

to adopt, but rather inclusion and unity.[604] By means of the earthly and heavenly hierarchies, the One mediates divine attributes to the created order. As these are received and, in turn, communicated by each of the descending orders of hypostases, the fabric of created beings is reshaped. The interplay of both hierarchies sets in motion a process of transformation that culminates in a deifying union with God. According to Dionysius, the hierarchical order of the cosmos serves the purpose of deification:

> The goal of hierarchy, then, is to enable beings to be as like as possible to God and to be at one with him. A hierarchy has God as its leader of all understanding and action. It is forever looking directly at the comeliness of God. A hierarchy bears in itself the mark of God. Hierarchy causes its members to be images of God in all respects, to be clear and spotless mirrors reflecting the glow of primordial light and indeed of God himself.[605]

Hierarchy is an essential means of overcoming human fragmentation and of assimilating to Divinity. Ultimately, it allows for full conformity to God. As seen earlier, this process is made possible through the administration of a threefold movement that purifies, illuminates, and perfects and that is rooted in the church. For Dionysius, our assimilation to God depends on the church. Its liturgy is the quintessential means of entering into the presence of the divine:

> For it is impossible that we humans should, in any immaterial way, rise up to imitate and to contemplate the heavenly hierarchies without the aid of those material means capable of guiding us as our nature requires. Hence, any thinking person realizes that the appearances of beauty are signs of an invisible loveliness. The beautiful odors which strike the senses are representations of a conceptual diffusion. Material lights are images of the outpouring of an immaterial gift of light. The thor-

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[604] Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* (London; New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 31.

[605] Dionysius, *CH* 3.2, in Luibheid (1987), p. 154.

> oughness of sacred discipleship indicates the immense contemplative capacity of the mind. Order and rank here below are a sign of the harmonious ordering toward the divine realm. The reception of the most divine Eucharist is a symbol of participation in Jesus.[606]

If humans wish to attain union with God, they are in need of material aid. As observed at the outset of this chapter, Dionysius proposes that such aid is provided by theurgical means, that is, by the liturgy. Its candles, incense, scriptural readings, sacraments, and orders of clergy collectively symbolize the incarnation. The liturgy manifests the presence of Deity to the congregation.[607] Through material objects, God's saving deeds are invoked, and Christians are initiated into the harmonious ordering of the divine realm. The church and its liturgy enable humans to draw ever closer to their source of being.

The idea that the ecclesiastical hierarchy and its liturgy manifest divine grace and facilitate union with God is exemplified by Dionysius' understanding of the Eucharist, to which he refers as the rite of *synaxis*, that is, the rite of communion or gathering. The celebration of the Eucharist draws "our fragmented lives together into a one-like divinization."[608] It is the high point of every rite and unites the holy people peacefully around the earthly and the heavenly altar. The celebration of the Eucharist joins members of the congregation around Christ, "our most divine altar,"[609] who "grants us the fullness of his own consecration and . . . arranges to offer generously to us, as children of God, whatever is consecrated on him."[610] By providing direct contact with the Son, the Eucharist brings the presence of Divinity to humans. It radiates deifying light and gathers the faithful into oneness with one another, the angels, and God.

If the celebration of the liturgy and of the Eucharist, in particular, draws Christians into unity with fellow beings, the angels,

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[606] Dionysius, *CH* 1.3, in Luibheid (1987), p. 146.
[607] Golitzin (1999a), p. 6.
[608] Dionysius, *EH* 3.1, in Luibheid (1987), p. 209.
[609] Dionysius, *EH* 3.3.12 in Luibheid (1987), p. 232.
[610] Dionysius, *EH* 3.3.12 in Luibheid (1987), p. 232.

and God, it also draws them into inner unity. While the structured order of the church at worship is a reflection of the heavenly realm, it is also a reflection of a person's inner condition. Indeed, it is not only impossible "to be gathered together toward the One and to partake of peaceful union with the One while divided among ourselves,"[611] but it is equally impossible to be illuminated and united with God while afflicted by inner fragmentation. For Dionysius, the Eucharist forges a union out of external as well as internal division.[612] Unless our inherent inner order is reestablished and reason's dominion over anger and desire asserted, Christians cannot become "both the temple and the companion of the Spirit of the Deity."[613]

The liturgy features prominently in a person's interior life. On the one hand, it is a transforming force that molds the soul from within.[614] It reintroduces intrapsychic order and allows for the divine consecration of inner faculties.[615] On the other hand, the liturgy is an outward projection of a person's inner condition. As Dionysius establishes in his eighth letter, the sacred order of the church is upset if the soul's original alignment is lost. For the hierarchical structure of the church and its liturgy to be maintained, the Christian has to "give due place within himself to reason, anger, and desire."[616] By disturbing the order of the soul and, hence, the order of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, humans place themselves beyond the reach of the cosmic hierarchical arrangement and the deifying light which it mediates. They place themselves beyond the divinely instituted structure that effects their transformation into temples of God.

Dionysius' emphasis on the transformation of Christians into divine shrines as well as his belief that the church at worship and the condition of the soul mirror one another reintroduces us to the

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[611] Dionysius, *EH* 3.3.8, in Luibheid (1987), p. 218.

[612] Dionysius, *EH* 3.1, in Luibheid (1987), p. 209.

[613] Dionysius, *EH* 3.3.7, in Luibheid (1987), p. 216.

[614] Golitzin (1999a), p. 7.

[615] Dionysius, *EH* 4.3.12, in Luibheid (1987), p. 232; Plested (2004), p. 253, n. 114.

[616] Dionysius, *Ep* 8.3, in Luibheid (1987), p. 275.

biblical temple motif and to the notion of its interiorization. We reenter the world of fourth century Syrian Christianity and come to realize that its interest in the liturgical conception of the ascetical life was not lost on Dionysius. Like his predecessors, the sixth century theologian establishes a close link between the external liturgy and the internal glorification of God. While Dionysius does not speak explicitly of the heart as an inner altar, we are left in little doubt that he views the purification, illumination, and perfection of our essential self as the means by which we are transformed into heavenly temples. In the heart, Christians enter into direct relationship with God.

Like his Syrian forefathers, but also like Origen and Evagrius, Dionysius embraces the spiritualization of the worship experience without suggesting withdrawal from the communal life of the church. As we have just seen, the church is an all-important means of transporting humans into the presence of Deity. It provides the relational setting which allows for internal, external, and cosmic reintegration. For Dionysius, the relational nature of the mystical life is beyond dispute. The very concept of hierarchy, the agent of unification *per se*, implies relatedness.

Bearing in mind that Dionysius coined the term "mystical theology" and that his teaching had a lasting impact on subsequent generations of Christian ascetical writers, it is of considerable interest to note his commitment to the communal nature of Christian existence. This feature invites us to revisit the ongoing discussion of whether ascetics of the early church did indeed seek intimacy with God by divorcing themselves from the world. The second question that presents itself and that has likewise been discussed repeatedly, the question of how early Christians viewed the human body, calls for further attention thereafter. Does Dionysius heed the teaching of earlier theologians and affirm the goodness of embodied existence? Is this a further instance in which a preconceived notion, the notion that ascetics deemed the body an inherent obstacle to divine union, can be shown to be misleading?

We have already witnessed Dionysius' interest in the relational dimension of Christian existence. The theologian suggested that the very concept of hierarchy implies interpersonal exchange and that it is the quintessential means by which humans are united with one another and with God. We have seen that the Eucharist, which

is numbered among the highest rank of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, marks the climax of every rite, because it allows for the transcendence of division and for the introduction of unity in Christ.[617]

We can deepen our understanding of the Dionysian notion of hierarchy and its inherently relational nature by considering the role of the hierarch, the celebrant of the mysteries. As part of the earthly community that is being saved and that mediates salvation,[618] the hierarch facilitates a person's return to God by conveying his own experience of divine love. In this respect, he exemplifies the Dionysian notion that Christians cannot know union with the One apart from a network of interconnected beings:

> Sharing in the divine peace, the higher gathering powers are drawn to themselves, to each other, and to unity and are at one with the source of peace in all the world. The ranks below them are united to themselves, to one another, and to the one perfect Source of Cause of universal peace.[619]

The principle of hierarchy is inherently relational, because it is never an impersonal principle. This is an important aspect to bear in mind. Members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy are real people, and relationships within the hierarchy are personal relationships.[620] If Dionysius emphasizes this feature with regard to the role of the hierarch and the celebration of the Eucharist, he does so also with regard to the service of ordination:

> The kiss at the conclusion of the clerical consecration also has a sacred meaning. For not only do all those belonging to the clerical orders give the kiss to the initiate but so too does the consecrating hierarch. When a mind has been made sacred by the type of its clerical activity, by its call from God . . . it deserves the love of its peers and of all those who belong to the most sacred orders. . . . So, then, this holy rite of the kiss between fellow clerics is fully appropriate. It denotes the sacred communion formed by like minds and the joyous shared love

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[617] Dionysius, *EH* 3.3.8, in Luibheid (1987), p. 218.
[618] Louth (1989), p. 41.
[619] Dionysius, *DN* 11.1, in Luibheid (1987), p. 121.
[620] Louth (1989), p. 66.

> which ensures for the whole hierarchy the beauty of its conformity to God.[621]

While Dionysius' reference to "love among peers" might seem to suggest division, his concluding sentence speaks to the all-embracing nature of love. Members of the clergy are joined to the laity no less than to one another. If the principle of hierarchy is characterized by relationships that are personal, it is likewise characterized by relationships that are inclusive. Dionysius presents a mystical doctrine in which there is no room for separation and enmity. God's love is passed down from the highest to the lowest of beings. Every member of the ecclesiastical hierarchy fulfills a specific function which serves to imitate Christ's "unspeakable, incomprehensible goodness"[622] and to draw all beings into fellowship. Dionysian mystical thought provides repeated evidence that ascetics of the early church valued neighborly relations over isolation. Separation from fellow beings implied separation from God.

If we now consider Dionysius' views on the material order and on the body in particular, we are able to observe that the theme of interrelatedness is also the driving force behind the creation of the physical realm. In our earlier discussion of cataphatic theology, we already had occasion to observe that the theologian looks to the material order as a display of divine glory. For Dionysius, the world is a theophany, a manifestation of God, and, as such, inherently sacred. The beauty and radiance of creation are a reflection of archetypal Beauty and Radiance. Dionysius insists that God and the world are inseparably linked:

> The name "One" means that God is uniquely all things through the transcendence of one unity and that he is the cause of all without ever departing from that oneness. Nothing in the world lacks its share in the One. Just as every number participates in unity . . . so everything, and every part of every-

[621] Dionysius, *EH* 5.3.6, in Luibheid (1987), p. 243.
[622] Dionysius, *Ep* 8.1, in Luibheid (1987), p. 271.

> thing, participates in the One. By being the One, it is all things.[623]

If every part of everything participates in the One, so does the body. Indeed, we need not search long to find proof of Dionysius' high regard for our embodied state. He conveys this sentiment concisely in a discussion of the rite for the dead. Given that the body shares with the soul in the many struggles of earthly existence, they are most fitting companions in this life and in the life to come. As such, the soul's physical vessel deserves reverence and a distinct place in the economy of salvation:

> Following on these rites the hierarch lays the body in an honored place alongside the bodies of other saints of the same order. If the deceased lived, body and soul, a life pleasing to God, his body will deserve to have a share of the honors bestowed on the soul which was its companion in the sacred struggle. That is why divine justice links the body with the soul when final judgment is rendered to the soul, for the body also took part in the same journey along the road of holiness or impiety. Hence the blessed ordinances grant divine communion to both the one and the other. . . . Thus the entire person is made holy, the work of his salvation is all-embracing, and the full rites make known the totality of the resurrection that is to come.[624]

The fundamental message of Dionysius' teaching is remarkably consistent, regardless of whether he addresses the relationship between the body and the soul, as he does in the above passage, between members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, between humans and spiritual beings, or between humans and God. Every aspect of his doctrine is guided by the principle of unity. Throughout his œuvre, the question foremost on Dionysius' mind pertains to the reversal of human fragmentation, be it internally or externally, and to the introduction of oneness with God. To safeguard the return to divine unity, the theologian introduces the principle of hierarchy,

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[623] Dionysius, *DN* 13.2, in Luibheid (1987), p. 128.
[624] Dionysius, *EH* 7.3.9, in Luibheid (1987), p. 257.

a feature which, in the Christian tradition, is very much his own. The celestial and ecclesiastical hierarchies are the primary means of overcoming division and of experiencing a deifying union. As divine love, light, and knowledge pass down the chain of interdependent beings, human nature progressively assimilates to its source of being. It is drawn into ever greater communion with fellow beings and with God. For Dionysius, the divide that separates humans from God, from one another, and from themselves, including the body, is but a transitory state. Salvation is all-embracing and reaches into the deepest recesses of the created order. It touches all beings who lead a life pleasing to God.

Given Dionysius' emphasis on unity, it comes perhaps as no surprise that he was an exceptionally adept synthesizer, who managed to shape diverse teachings into an organic whole. In his writings, he joined Neoplatonic themes and Christian doctrine with ease. He reconciled the intellectual aspect of theology and its emotive, intuitive element with the same degree of command. Dionysian mystical thought accords a place to silence as well as speech, to light but also to darkness. The hidden and the manifest captured the theologian's imagination to an equal degree.

Dionysius was no less adept at joining aspects of the Origenian and the Syrian strands of early Christian mystical teaching. Well acquainted with the former legacy, he drew on many concepts previously expounded by Evagrius. Much of his doctrine on the ascetical life is colored by Evagrian thought, most notably his views on the passions, on the virtuous, single-minded life, and on undistracted, imageless prayer. But Dionysius' true home was the world of early Christian Syria, and he acknowledged these roots by placing the church and its liturgy at the center of the mystical life. For him, they were vital elements of Christian existence in more than one way. The church and its liturgy dominated a person's external life and brought Christians into close proximity with fellow beings. Equally, they enabled the faithful to touch upon the heavenly realm and to join the angels in their glorification before the throne of God. However, the church and its liturgy also dominated the interior life of the Christian. If the inherent order of the soul was reestablished through the mediating activity of the ecclesiastical hierarchy and its rites, the deepest self of every seeker could be transformed into a temple. Reintroduced to a state of inner purity and

integration, humans were able to take their rightful place in the cosmic hierarchical order and to know God in an ecstatic union of love.

Dionysius' ability to synthesize earlier teachings and to wield them into a coherent, compelling system of his own was instrumental to the flowering of the prayer of the heart in the Byzantine period. Although Dionysius had less to say on the topic of prayer, especially as it relates to the heart, than many of his predecessors, his emphasis on the triadic movement toward God and on the encounter with Divinity in a darkness of unknowing shaped the doctrine of inner prayer to a decisive degree. So, too, did his belief in love as the driving force behind the soul's return to the One.

Still today, members of the Christian community may reap inspiration from Dionysius' teaching, not least for presenting them with a mystical doctrine that places the theme of reintegration at its very center and that heralds the unity of body and soul, of the individual and the community, and of the earthly and heavenly spheres. Dionysius' emphasis on the pervasiveness of love invites individuals who feel separated from God to take heart and to know that no one who longs for divine communion is excluded from the outreach of heavenly love. If modern Christians object to the idea that this outreach of love depends on the hierarchical arrangement of the church, Dionysius' inclusive interpretation of hierarchy may ease some of their trepidation. It may help them to view the ecclesiastical hierarchy, first and foremost, as a body of initiation which, through the sanctifying power of its liturgy, seeks to guide humans toward closer relations with one another, with the angels, and with God.

We will now turn our attention to Maximus the Confessor, one of the most prominent early Byzantine theologians, an admirer of Dionysius, and a masterful synthesizer in his own right. Like Dionysius, Maximus was deeply committed to the tradition of inner prayer and to the dissemination of Christianity's Greek and Syrian legacy. Like his predecessor, Maximus valued the detailed, systematic explication of Christian doctrine yet never abandoned the fundamental belief that humans come to know divine love in an experiential manner. For him, intellectual elucidation and the personal encounter with God went hand in hand. Maximus further agreed with Dionysius that the quest for God never excludes the

body. His belief in the goodness of creation and of embodied existence was lasting. Lasting, too, was his understanding that the transformation of the heart into the new temple of God never calls into question the relational nature of Christian existence.

But Maximus was not only a skillful synthesizer. He was also an original thinker who adopted a doctrine only after subjecting it to careful inquiry. Hence, he forged a mystical teaching that was a work of originality no less than a work of synthesis. His ability to refine, elaborate, and, where necessary, correct earlier teachings enabled him to present posterity with an ascetical doctrine that, to this day, remains integral to the theology of Orthodox Christianity. Let us take a closer look at the teaching of this important early Byzantine theologian in the upcoming section.

MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR

If we wish to understand why Maximus the Confessor played so important a role in furthering the tradition of the prayer of the heart, a role which he gained, not least of all, for joining elements of the Hellenic and the Syrian mystical traditions into an ascetical doctrine of great insight, we do well to start out by giving thought to his conception of the incarnation. As we do so, we come to realize that Maximus' emphasis on the incarnation of the Logos in history and in the individual soul gave rise to a teaching greatly invested in corporeality. Despite the theologian's interest in the spiritualization of human nature, he never failed to declare the beauty of the created order and the importance of the body, nor did his interest in the interiorization of the liturgy propel him to question the value of the church and its network of social relations. Like many of his early Christian predecessors, Maximus argued that the true follower of Christ—the true mystic—is not a person who strives for perfection by negating physical reality. The genuine mystic does not look upon inner prayer as an isolating, divisive enterprise but views it as a means of entering ever more fully into relations with the body, the neighbor, and God. The practice of inner prayer serves but one purpose: to experience God's all-embracing love viscerally and to draw fellow beings into its sphere of influence. To just how great of a degree this understanding characterized Maximus' ascetical doctrine will hopefully become apparent in the following discussion.

Maximus conceives of the incarnation as a turning point in the history of the cosmos and places it at the center of his doctrinal as well as mystical teaching.[625] He presents his views on the enfleshment of the Logos by proposing that, in Christ, human and divine nature are joined in a hypostatic union. In accordance with the Chalcedonian definition, Maximus advances the idea that Christ embraces the extremes of divinity and humanity "without mixing" (*asunchutos*), "without change" (*atreptos*), "without division" (*adiairetos*), and "without separation" (*achoristos*).[626] The unity of both natures is fully affirmed without any hint of mixture in the sense of confusion. Although inseparable, each modality preserves the individuality of its elements.[627]

Maximus describes the mystery of the hypostatic union which allowed Christ to join the two natures of his being in terms of their co-inherence, or *perichoresis*. The *perichoresis* of divinity and humanity effects a new mode of existence, which is characterized by the ability to transcend the boundaries of each nature while keeping both modalities entirely intact.[628] The human and divine elements are preserved and, at the same time, enhanced:

> For there is a 'certain new' thing, characteristic of the new mystery, the *logos* of which is the ineffable mode of the coming together. For who knows how God assumes flesh and yet remains God, how, remaining true God, he is true man, showing himself truly both in his natural existence, and each through the other, and yet changing neither? [629]

Through *perichoresis*, divine and human energies cooperate and create a new, enhanced reality. The former nature is humanized and can work in an embodied fashion. The latter nature, in turn, begins to work in a divine manner and to manifest heavenly attributes.

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[625] Louth (1996), p. 51.

[626] Aidan Nichols, *Byzantine Gospel: Maximus the Confessor in Modern Scholarship* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), p. 139.

[627] Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1995), pp. 43-44.

[628] Thunberg (1995), p. 35.

[629] Maximus, *Amb* 5, in Louth (1996), p. 177.

Each element remains what it is, yet simultaneously transcends itself.[630]

While the quintessential hypostatic union of divine and human nature was effected in Christ, Maximus suggests that the ineffable co-inherence of two opposing natures, their energies, and their wills continues to take place in individual believers who are being deified. Deification takes the process of union in Christ as its paradigm and allows for its ongoing reenactment. Maximus writes:

> For they say that God and man are paradigms one of another, that as much as God is humanized to man through love for mankind, so much is man able to be deified to God through love, and that as much as man is caught up by God to what is known in his mind, so much does man manifest God, who is invisible by nature, through the virtues.[631]

Deification is the perfect expression of the divine-human encounter. It implies an ecstatic union with Divinity in which humans attain likeness to God while surrendering none of their humanity.[632] As a result of God's revelatory movement toward the created order and the believer's active pursuit of purification, illumination, and perfection, human nature becomes God-like and reflects the greatest of virtues—love.

This is but a brief exposition of Maximus' understanding of the divine-human union that was effected at the incarnation and that marks the life of all Christians who experience deification. We will return to this teaching at a later point in our discussion, as we consider the Maximian conception of human embodiment. For now, let us begin our exploration of the theologian's ascetical doctrine by considering his views on the mystical path. What are its salient features, and in what way does the quest for God lead to the progressive sanctification of human nature? Where does Maximus

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[630] Thunberg (1995), p. 46.

[631] Maximus, *Amb* 10.3, in Louth (1996), p. 101.

[632] Polycarp Sherwood, "Introduction," in *St. Maximus the Confessor: The Ascetic Life, The Four Centuries on Charity*, trans. Polycarp Sherwood (Mahwah, NJ: Newman Press, 1955), p. 72.

draw on earlier theologians, and in which instances does he correct, develop, or synthesize these teachings? On which occasions does he present a doctrine very much his own?

As we consider Maximus' mystical theology, we soon observe that he retains much of Evagrius' ascetical wisdom while tempering his questionable Origenian metaphysics.[633] Maximus does not agree, for instance, with Origen's belief in the pre-existence of the soul, nor does Origen's understanding of the cosmos reflect sufficiently his own views on creation as an environment of God's loving care. Maximus does, however, embrace many viewpoints articulated by Origen and Evagrius on the inner dimension of human existence. His triadic division of human nature and of the soul are strongly reminiscent of Alexandrian Greek teaching. Maximus takes for granted the Origenian notion of the image of God in the human soul. His teaching on the passions, on vice and virtue, and on inner purification is deeply indebted to Evagrius, as is his conception of the mystical life in terms of a threefold structure.[634]

Like Evagrius, Maximus views the ascetical life as passing through three stages, the stages of *praktike* or *praxis*, *gnosis*, and *theologia*. He agrees with Evagrius that these stages should be envisioned as parallel ways rather than as a chronological order, although, as in so many instances, he presses this point more than his fourth century predecessor does. While Maximus concurs with Evagrius that the active life is to some degree a preparatory stage, he insists that the struggle to defy vice and gain virtue always complements the *vita contemplativa*. The fight against the passions, in turn, depends on rational discernment and on the ability to detect the inner principle of created things. For Maximus, the active life and the practice of noetic skills go hand in hand:

[633] Louth (1996), p. 24.
[634] Thunberg (1995), p. 411.

> He who embodies spiritual knowledge in his practice of the virtues and animates this practice with spiritual knowledge has found the perfect method of accomplishing the divine work.[635]

In his discussion of the first stage, Maximus follows Evagrius' lead by stressing the need for freedom from the passions. If humans wish to enter into the presence of God, they have to strive for inner purification; they have to conquer vice and acquire virtue. Maximus has a great deal to say on this topic. His hierarchy of the vices, which he bases on the threefold division of the soul, shows clear knowledge of the Evagrian system. Maximus, however, reworks and elaborates on Evagrius' enumeration by placing self-love (*philautia*) at its very center. For him, love of self is the source from which all passions flow.[636] It is the origin and mother of evil.[637] It destroys the unity of a person's inner faculties and ushers in a life of interior disintegration. Self-love separates humans from one another and is therefore also the cause of external fragmentation:

> The devil has deceived us by guile in a malicious and cunning way, provoking us through self-love to sensual pleasures (cf. Gen. 3:1-5). He has separated us in our wills from God and from each other; he has perverted straightforward truth and in this manner has divided humanity, cutting it up into many opinions and fantasies.

Maximus' emphasis on the dangers of self-love and his introduction of four additional vices, the vices of rapacity, resentfulness, envy, and slander, all of which address our relationship with fellow humans, are two aspects of the theologian's teaching that strongly suggest an abiding interest in the communal setting of Christian existence. As we deepen our discussion of Maximus' mystical doctrine, we will see just how pervasive his emphasis on personal relatedness is.

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[635] Maximus, *VT* 4.88, in *Philokalia*, vol. 2, trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 257.

[636] Maximus, *Ep* 2, in Louth (1996), pp. 87-88.

[637] Maximus, *VT* 1. 33, in *Philokalia* 2, p. 172.

If enslavement to vice implies the misuse of human faculties, the progressive acquisition of virtue is a major tool of effecting their reintegration. According to Maximus, virtues calm the concupiscible and irascible parts of the soul and strengthen its rational element, bringing peace to the body. Virtuous conduct allows humans to discern the true needs of the soul and the body:

> If you want to be a just person, assign to each aspect of yourself—to your soul and your body—what accords with it. To the intelligent aspect of the soul assign spiritual reading, contemplation and prayer; to the incensive aspect, spiritual love, the opposite of hatred; to the desiring aspect, moderation and self-control; to the fleshly part, food and clothing, for these alone are necessary (cf. 1 Tim. 6:8).[638]

Maximus' enumeration of the virtues (faith, fear of God, self-mastery, patience and long-suffering, hope in God, detachment, and love) is very similar to the Evagrian hierarchy. Similar, too, is his understanding that the goal of *praktike* is not the repression of the passions but rather their sublimation or redirection. Neither theologian calls for the eradication of the passible elements of the soul but advises instead that they be harnessed and brought into accord with the soul's rational faculty.

A similar course of reasoning characterizes their views on the state of *apatheia,* which marks the climax of the first mystical phase. Dispassion does not imply a state of emotional remoteness and disinterestedness but rather a state of serenity. The soul at peace is no longer subject to thwarted thoughts and behaviors. A seeker who has attained dispassion "sees things clearly in their true nature. Consequently, he both acts and speaks with regard to all things in a manner which is fitting, and he is never deluded."[639] *Apatheia* describes a state of spiritual freedom in which the soul is capable of seeing things for what they truly are. Sinful desires have been replaced by a new and better energy from God.[640]

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[638] Maximus, *CC* 4.44, in *Philokalia* 2, p. 105.
[639] Maximus, *CC* 1.92, in *Philokalia* 2, p. 63.
[640] Ware (1997c), p. 398.

Maximus also embraces Evagrius' notion of charity as a vital aspect of *praktike* and as the quintessential means of acquiring knowledge of God. Goodwill and the cultivation of love counteract detachment, which, although part of the ascetical life, may lead to isolation if given too much attention. However, Maximus develops this aspect to an even greater degree than Evagrius and endows love with such importance as to place it at the very center of his ascetical teaching. For him, the entire mystical path, including the first stage, is about how we love.[641] Love is the greatest of virtues and outlasts faith and hope.[642] Love embraces friends as well as foes. Long-suffering and kind, it enables the worthy to love all humans equally.[643]

Turning to consider Maximus' teaching on the second stage of the mystical ascent, we observe that this stage is characterized largely by the principle of contemplation, although, as we have seen, engagement in natural contemplation does not release the ascetic from the pursuit of the active life. Time and again, Maximus emphasizes the interplay and ultimate unity of the active and contemplative aspects of Christian existence.

Like Evagrius, Maximus distinguishes between a lower form of contemplation, the contemplation of visible things, and its higher expression, the contemplation of invisible things.[644] Maximus agrees with Evagrius that contemplation implies the discernment of the *logoi* of created things, which manifest God's existence and glory. Contemplation calls for the exploration of their divine purpose of existence, their relationship to each other, and their relationship to the Logos. Through the contemplation of the *logoi*, the human mind advances toward knowledge of the Logos Creator, the one in whom they are all unified. Thereafter, the mind rises even further and, passing beyond knowledge of the *logoi*, attains union with God above all concepts and notions. The rational prin-

[641] Louth (1996), p. 38.
[642] Maximus, *CC* 3.100, in *Philokalia.* 2, p. 99.
[643] Maximus, *CC* 1.17, in *Philokalia* 2, p. 54.
[644] Maximus, *VT* 2.98, in *Philokalia* 2, p. 208.

ciples of creation allow humans to know that God is, even if we can never hope to know what God is:[645]

> Created beings can be known rationally by means of the inner principles which are by nature intrinsic to such beings and by which they are naturally defined. But from our apprehension of these principles inherent in created things we can do no more than believe that God exists.[646]

In one aspect, however, Maximus' conception of the second stage departs considerably from the Evagrian systematization. Maximus suggests that not all Christians have to pass through the second stage of the mystical path to be deified but can attain union with God on the basis of the *vita practica* alone. While divine union calls for pure prayer, the ability to engage in this form of contemplation is a gift of grace and does not require extensive immersion in the practice of natural contemplation. Hence, it is possible for non-contemplative monastics and for non-monastics in general to arrive at pure prayer and divine union without having traversed the second stage.

This element of Maximian teaching is quite striking and allows us to observe how much importance the theologian accords to the virtuous life and to the daily, practical aspect of Christian existence. It confirms our earlier observation that the active and contemplative lives are supplementary and, ultimately, belong together. If Christians can be deified on the basis of the active life alone, they are able to do so, because the pursuit of such an existence, in and of itself, develops their rational faculties. According to Maximus, an important means of engaging in noetic ascesis, even during the stage of *praktike*, is adherence to the commandments. This practice trains the mind to discern the *logoi* of the commandments and, through them, to communicate with the Logos, whom they manifest. Keeping the commandments is therefore an important component of the active life which provides partial knowledge of the Logos.

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[645] Thunberg (1995), p. 411.

[646] Maximus, *CT* 1.9, in *Philokalia* 2, pp. 115-116.

Let us now examine Maximus' teaching on the final stage of the quest for God by considering more closely his double concept of pure prayer. In the *Centuries on Charity,* the theologian writes:

> Two states of pure prayer are exalted above all others. One is to be found in those who have not advanced beyond the practice of the virtues, the other in those leading the contemplative life. The first is engendered in the soul by fear of God and a firm hope in Him, the second by an intense longing for God and by total purification. The sign of the first is that the intellect, abandoning all conceptual images of the world, concentrates itself and prays without distraction or disturbance as if God Himself were present, as indeed He is. The sign of the second is that at the very onset of prayer the intellect is so ravished by the divine and infinite light that it is aware neither of itself nor of any other created thing, but only of Him who through love has activated such radiance in it. It is then that, being made aware of God's qualities, it receives clear and distinct reflections of Him.[647]

Maximus does not appear to subordinate one form of prayer to the other, although the second kind of prayer which is open to the "gnostic," or contemplative, seems to be more exalted.[648] The first form of pure prayer implies undistracted prayer which is built directly on the virtues of the active life and, as we have seen, on some spiritual contemplation. Through the gift of grace, the mind is joined to God and able to withdraw from the thoughts of the world. It becomes God-like in its purity and capable of praying without ceasing. The second form of pure prayer is motivated by desirous love and aims at mystical union with God. As the mind transcends all impressions and conceptual images, it is rapt outside of itself into the very presence of Divinity.[649]

In his discussion of both forms of prayer, Maximus emphasizes the fact that the intellect moves beyond thought to enter into the deep, undistracted contemplation of God. In this respect, his

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[647] Maximus, *CC* 2.6, in *Philokalia* 2, pp. 65-66.
[648] Thunberg (1995), p. 364.
[649] Maximus, *CC* 3.44, in *Philokalia* 2, p. 90.

notion of prayer resembles Evagrius' concept of pure prayer. But if we take a closer look at Maximus' understanding of the latter form of prayer, we see quite clearly that the transition from the second to the third stage of the mystical quest is not only a matter of stripping away and simplifying but also, and more importantly, of loving.[650] Although this feature is by no means absent from the teaching of Evagrius, its prevalence in the Maximian corpus is particularly suggestive of Dionysius' doctrine of love. Like Dionysius, Maximus cannot conceive of pure prayer and divine union apart from blessed rapture:

> Sabbaths of Sabbaths signify the spiritual calm of the deiform soul that has withdrawn the intellect even from contemplation of all the divine principles in created beings, that through an ecstasy of love has clothed it entirely in God alone, and that through mystical theology has brought it altogether to rest in God.[651]

Maximus is not only indebted to Dionysius for supplying him with the notion of ecstatic love. He further strengthens the link with the mystical doctrine of his sixth century predecessor by placing the rapturous union with God within the context of divine unknowability. This feature is made explicit in the following words:

> Thus he who through obedience has kept the commandments has achieved righteousness and, moreover, he has not cut himself off from union in love with Him who gave them. . . . When you have passed through the manifold principles relating to providence, you attain through unknowing the very principle of divine unity.[652]

For Maximus as for Dionysius, the highest stage of spiritual perfection is characterized by love and supreme ignorance. Christians who reach the climax of *theologia* are united with God, who is unfathomable and "who is more than infinite."[653] They come face

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[650] Louth (1996), p. 43.
[651] Maximus, *CT* 1.39, in *Philokalia* 2, p. 122.
[652] Maximus, *CT* 2.7-8, in *Philokalia* 2, p. 139.
[653] Maximus, *CC* 3.100, in *Philokalia* 2, p. 99.

to face with the One, who "transcends mind and sense and being and knowledge."[654] Unlike the earlier stages, the last stage is altogether trans-rational in nature. Love and ignorance are all-pervasive. To convey the incomprehensible nature of the deifying encounter with God, Maximus adopts Dionysius' apophatic terminology.

So far, we have spent much time comparing the doctrines of Maximus and Evagrius. Before we turn to consider other major influences on Maximus' mystical doctrine—Dionysius being one of them, as we have just seen, it is helpful to give thought to one last Maximian teaching that is greatly shaped by Evagrius. Let us take a closer look at Maximus' anthropological teaching and examine the ways in which this highly sophisticated system lends a firm philosophical foundation to the ancient tradition of inner prayer.

Maximus mirrors Evagrius' anthropological doctrine in many respects, not least in his conception of human nature as a triad of body, soul, and mind. Unlike Origen, who adopts the Pauline triad of body, soul, and spirit and distinguishes between the *nous*, the highest aspect of the soul, and the spirit, the divine element present in humans, Maximus and Evagrius commonly substitute the mind, or *nous*, for the biblical term spirit. All three theologians agree, however, that the *nous* is the organ of contemplation, its highest function being the uninterrupted meditation on divine realities and on God. Maximus, Evagrius, and Origen view the *nous* as a person's spiritual center and the locus of divine-human communion. The objective of the ascetical life, they further agree, is to gain control over the two passible elements of the soul. While we have seen in our earlier discussion of Evagrius that the concupiscible and the irascible aspects of the soul in their original state assist the *nous* in its ascent, a state of excessive or misdirected desire and anger sabotages the intellective aspirations of the soul, incites the body, and obstructs the natural movement toward God.

In his explication of our inner faculties, Maximus pays close attention not only to the *nous* but also to the *logos*, or reason, the rational part of the soul, and presents a complex picture of their

[654] Maximus, *Amb* 10.17, in Louth (1996), p. 109.

relationship. Ever consistent in his teaching on the fundamental unity of the active and the contemplative life, Maximus discerns parallel movements of the mind and of reason and suggests that the former directs a person's gnostic activity, while the latter governs the activity of the practical life. The mind is placed at the service of the quest for truth. It seeks to probe deeply into the essential nature of the cosmos and its divine source. Reason, in turn, propels seekers toward virtue:[655]

> By means of it the mind, which is also called wisdom, as we said, increasing in the habit of contemplation in the ineffable silence and knowledge, is led to the truth by enduring and incomprehensible knowledge. For its part, the reason, which we called prudence, ends up at the good by means of faith in the active engagement of its body in virtue. In both these things consists the true science of divine and human matters, the truly secure knowledge and term of all divine wisdom according to Christians.[656]

Despite the supremacy of the *nous*, Maximus does not divorce it from the remaining human faculties. For him, even more so than for Evagrius, human nature constitutes a unified whole. As a person's spiritual center, the *nous* integrates all inner faculties and, in response to grace, orients them toward God. In this task, it is aided by reason. It is assisted also by the will, a faculty to which the *nous* is so closely linked as to make it impossible for humans to will without employing the mind and to use the latter without being moved in their inherent faculty of willing. Together with the will, the *nous* chooses to direct desire and love either towards divine things or towards things of the flesh. Given Maximus' emphasis on a person's inherent power of self-determination,[657] humans are at all times free to determine their course of action:

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[655] Lars Thunberg, *Man and the Cosmos: The Vision of St. Maximus the Confessor* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), pp. 124-125.

[656] Maximus, *Myst* 5, in *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, trans. George C. Berthold (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), p. 191.

[657] Louth (1996), p. 60; Nichols (1993), pp. 200-203.

> No deiform soul is in its essence of greater value than any other deiform soul. For when God in His supernal goodness creates each soul in His own image, He brings it into being endowed with self-determination. By exercising this freedom of choice each soul either reaffirms its true nobility or through its actions deliberately embraces what is ignoble.[658]

Whatever course of action humans may choose, the soul, the will, and, as we will see shortly, the body support the *nous* in its every aspiration. Maximus views the mystical quest as a truly integrative process that depends on thought, intention, emotion, and action. Time after time, he proposes the fundamental unity of the human composite. The holistic biblical understanding of our nature is critical to Maximus' thought.

The above comments on Maximian teachings suggest a complex and sophisticated anthropological doctrine. In many instances, Maximus takes Evagrian anthropology as his starting-point and elaborates on his predecessor's system. On other occasions, as, for instance, in his exposition of the human will, he presents a doctrine that is very much his own.[659] What is important to establish at this point is Maximus' debt to the Greek Christian mystical strand for providing him with the terminology to explore the intricacies of a person's interior world. Origen's legacy presented Maximus with a philosophical system which allowed for the careful inquiry into the stages of the mystical path and their successful traversal. By building on this legacy, he was able to outline the ways in which virtuous conduct, contemplation, and the highest form of contemplation, pure prayer, might bring about an ecstatic union with Divinity.

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[658] Maximus, *CT* 1.11, in *Philokalia* 2, p. 116.

[659] Maximus articulated the doctrine of the will in response to his involvement in the heated discussions on the two wills of Christ. Of special importance is his distinction between the gnomic will, which he links closely to human separation from God, sinfulness, and the inability to see clearly and the natural will, which implies accurate vision and a person's ability to turn freely to God. For an in-depth discussion of this teaching, see Thunberg (1995), pp. 208-230. A helpful introduction is provided by Louth (1996), pp. 59-62.

Maximus was able to guide ascetical practitioners toward greater internal cohesion and toward the deification of their being.

The above discussion of Maximus' anthropological teaching provides us with the opportunity to revisit a number of topics examined in earlier chapters, most notably the biblical doctrine of the heart. Bearing in mind that Maximus points to the *nous* as the spiritual center of human beings, the question inevitably arises of whether he looks to the heart, the scriptural symbol of our personal unity, as a compatible term. Does Maximus, like Origen and Evagrius before him, use both expressions interchangeably, and, if so, what might this suggest about the overall orientation of his ascetical doctrine? Does usage of the concept of the heart endow his teaching with a distinctly affective tone, a tone that we are wont to associate with the mystical heritage of the ancient Syrian church?

Maximus' writings present ample evidence that he embraces the biblical language of the heart and that, for him, the compatibility of the terms heart and intellect is beyond dispute:

> This applies to those who no longer spend their time on things to do with the body, but strive to cleanse the intellect (*nous*) (which the Lord calls 'heart' [*kardian*]) from hatred and dissipation.[660]

Given the interchangeable use of both terms, it is of little surprise that Maximus pays close attention to the heart as the seat of spiritual knowledge:

> If, as St Paul says, Christ dwells in our hearts through faith (cf. Eph. 3:17), and all the treasures of wisdom and spiritual knowledge are hidden in Him (cf. Col. 2:3), then all the treasures of wisdom and spiritual knowledge are hidden in our hearts.[661]

As suggested in the above words, the heart is the seat of knowledge and wisdom because it is God's dwelling-place. Maxi-

[660] Maximus, *CC* 4.73, in *Philokalia* 2, p. 109.
[661] Maximus, *CC* 4.70, in *Philokalia* 2, p. 109.

mus heralds the idea of the heart as a divine shrine throughout his work:

> When God comes to dwell in such a heart, He honours it by engraving His own letters on it through the Holy Spirit, just as He did on the Mosaic tablets (cf. Exod. 31:18). This He does according to the degree to which the heart, through practice of the virtues and contemplation, has devoted itself to the admonition which bids us, in a mystical sense, 'Be fruitful and multiply' (Gen. 35:11).[662]

Maximus' teaching on the heart is unambiguous. The heart is a temple in which Christ resides through faith. It is a place of divine indwelling, provided it is pure, virtuous, and capable of deep meditation. Maximus elaborates on his understanding of the heart as the seat of wisdom and as God's abode in yet another passage. In it, he suggests that this inner faculty also serves as "a workshop of evil thoughts," an idea that calls to mind the Syrian conception of the heart in terms of an apocalyptic arena, a battlefield between the forces of good and evil:

> But in none is He fully present as the author of wisdom except in those who have understanding, and who by their holy way of life have made themselves fit to receive His indwelling and deifying presence. For everyone who does not carry out the divine will, even though he is a believer, has a heart which, being a workshop of evil thoughts, lacks understanding.[663]

Throughout Maximus' oeuvre, we encounter passages that reflect Syrian influences. According to the theologian, the heart is home to virtue and vice; it may be a treasure trove or a place of darkness and sin. In its ideal state, that is, after it has been purified by virtue and illuminated by contemplation, it is a point of self-transcendence in which humans encounter God. Such a heart serves as the place where

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[662] Maximus, *CT* 2.80, in *Philokalia* 2, p. 158.
[663] Maximus, *VT* 1.73, in *Philokalia* 2, pp. 180-181.

> the Logos of God becomes manifest and radiant in us. . . . In those found worthy, the Logos of God is transfigured to the degree to which each has advanced in holiness, and He comes to them with His angels in the glory of the Father.[664]

Like his Syrian predecessors and like Macarius in particular, Maximus looks to the purified heart as a place illuminated by the glory of God. For him, this experience is of such consequence as to invite comparison with Christ's transfiguration on Mount Tabor.

Maximus' conception of our innermost self as a temple which, "mystically built by peace, becomes in spirit the dwelling-place of God,"[665] as well as his reference to the transfiguration and its rendition in terms of an intrapsychic process reintroduces us to a prevalent theme of this study: the interiorization of the biblical glory tradition and the reconceptualization of the temple motif in terms of the purified heart. The transformation of the heart into a place of theophany is a compelling motif for Maximus and constitutes a cornerstone of his mystical teaching. We will now take a closer look at this teaching and consider, in particular, the degree to which the theologian emphasizes the felt, experiential nature of the interior liturgy.

Maximus' conception of the encounter with God in the temple of the heart as a visceral experience is not difficult to fathom, especially if we recall his emphasis on love as the driving force behind human deification. Let us reiterate that, for Maximus, the spiritual life is motivated by love; it is about how we relate to ourselves, to others, and to God.[666] Love is the defining feature of Christian existence. It purifies the heart and facilitates pure prayer. At the final stage of the mystical quest, divine love takes the intellect out of itself and, carrying it beyond knowledge, allows for an ecstatic union with Divinity. Love characterizes the beginning and the end of the search for perfection.

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[664] Maximus, *CT* 2.14-15, in *Philokalia* 2, pp. 140-141.
[665] Maximus, *CT* 1.53, in *Philokalia* 2, p. 125.
[666] Louth (1996), p. 39.

By insisting on the primacy of love, Maximus alludes to the inner, tangible experience of God and the participatory nature of the mystical journey.[667] As we have seen, this feature is not absent from the theology of Origen and Evagrius. However, it is particularly pronounced in the mystical thought of the ancient Syrian church and vividly calls to mind the Macarian notion of the heart as it becomes aware of God's inner presence. Maximus' emphasis on participatory knowledge of Divinity also evokes the Dionysian distinction between the rational theological method and its symbolic, mystical counterpart. Maximus, for his part, writes:

> According to the wise, we cannot use our intelligence to think about God at the same time as we experience Him, or have an intellection of Him while we are perceiving Him directly. By 'think about God' I mean speculate about Him on the basis of an analogy between Him and created beings. By 'perceiving Him directly' I mean experiencing divine or supranatural realities through participation. . . . What we have said is confirmed by the fact that, in general, our experience of a thing puts a stop to our thinking about it, and our direct perception of it supersedes our intellection of it.[668]

Maximus leaves his audience in no doubt that experiential knowledge of God is superior to speculative knowledge. The latter is relative, non-participatory, and dependent on human constructs. It does not suffice to propel humans into the presence of God. For this to occur, seekers have a need for knowledge that brings total perception of what is known through grace and direct experience.[669] Once the heart is touched by grace and consciously discerns the stirrings of holy love, humans apprehend God in an intimate manner. The notion of the heart as a divine temple is at the center of Maximus' teaching on the visceral experience of God.

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[667] Plested (2004), p. 235.

[668] Maximus, *VT* 4.31, in *Philokalia* 2, pp. 242-243.

[669] Maximus, *VT* 4.31, in *Philokalia* 2, p. 242. For a discussion of this feature, see Plested (2004), pp. 235-236.

Maximus expounds his doctrine of the heart and of the heart's role as an interior altar in the *Mystagogia*, a work on the Eucharistic liturgy. In it, he adopts the approach of his predecessors and establishes an explicit link between the spiritual altar of the heart or, depending on his terminology, of the mind and the altar of the church:

> And again from another point of view he [Dionysius the Areopagite] used to say that holy Church is like a man because for the soul it has the sanctuary, for mind it has the divine altar, and for body it has the nave.[670]

Maximus devotes the final three chapters of the *Mystagogia* to an illustration of how the movement of the liturgy provides an interpretation of a person's inner movement toward God. Like the liturgy of the church, the celebration of the interior liturgy introduces humans to divine life. If Christians offer their pure, moral selves from the spiritual altar, they become suffused with heavenly light:

> Conversely, man is a mystical church, because through the nave which is his body he brightens by virtue the ascetic force of the soul by the observance of the commandments in moral wisdom. Through the sanctuary of his soul he conveys to God in natural contemplation through reason the principles of sense purely in spirit cut off from matter. Finally, through the altar of the mind he summons the silence abounding in song in the innermost recesses of the unseen and unknown utterance of divinity by another silence, rich in speech and tone. And as far as man is capable, he dwells familiarly within mystical theology and becomes such as is fitting for one made worthy of his indwelling and he is marked with his dazzling splendor.[671]

The unifying progression from nave, to sanctuary, to altar outlined in the above words is mirrored by the three stages of the mystical quest which unite body, soul, and mind. Just as the movement of the public celebration enables participants to experience the

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[670] Maximus, *Myst* 4, in Berthold (1985), pp. 189-190.
[671] Maximus, *Myst* 4, in Berthold (1985), p. 190.

healing power of divine grace, so the movement of the interior liturgy reverses inner fragmentation and reestablishes divine order. As the lower aspects of the soul are brought into accord with reason, its higher aspect, the soul and the will mutually support the *nous* in its strivings for divine knowledge. These strivings are enhanced by the body which, unhindered by distorting thought patterns, is in a state of equilibrium and actively engaged in the pursuit of virtuous conduct.

Maximus proposes that the restoration of inner order and the reintegration of body, soul, and mind readies Christians for their God-given task of mediating between all that has been separated.[672] Once the order of the personal universe, the microcosm, has been reestablished, humans work toward the healing of divisions on a macrocosmic level. For Maximus, the existences of the individual, of the church, and of the world at large are intimately linked.[673] Each is a reflection of the other; return to oneness on a personal level manifests itself on a communal and cosmic level.

Reintegration, or unity, is an all-pervasive theme in Maximus' mystical doctrine. Body, soul, and mind are one, as are all members of the Christian community. Despite his emphasis on the spiritualization and interiorization of the liturgy, Maximus never questions the importance of embodiment and relatedness. Both aspects of human existence are essential to the successful traversal of the mystical path. Like his predecessors, the theologian believes that the severance of ties with materiality inhibits rather than advances the apprehension of Divinity.

If we wish to explore Maximus' views on human embodiment and on the communal life to which the former gives rise, we must return to our opening comments on his conception of the hypostatic union of divinity and humanity. At that point, it was suggested that the enfleshment of the Logos made the co-inherence of human and divine nature possible without subjecting either to confusion, change, or division. This co-inherence allowed the Son to ascend to the right hand of the Father in his full humanity, that is,

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[672] Thunberg (1995), p. 231.

[673] Cooper (2005), p. 194.

in body and soul.[674] For Maximus, the implications of this teaching on the human condition are far-reaching. Christ's ascension with his earthly body, consubstantial with ours, bestowed upon humankind the gift of being deified in its entirety. Body and soul cannot be sundered. Like the union of divinity and humanity, the union of a person's material and immaterial nature is indissoluble. The coexistence of both realities safeguards the resurrection of the body and its participation in eternal life.[675]

To be sure, Maximus places the body at the lowest rung of an ordered hierarchy that rises through the soul and the intellect to God. The body is comparable neither to the sanctuary nor to the altar of the church, but rather to its nave. Like Ephrem, who, in his *Hymns on Paradise*, likens the body to the lower slopes of the divine mountain, Maximus does not question the superiority of the soul over the body and of the intellect over the soul, yet he proposes that if this order is maintained, the body, too, gains access to God. By virtue of its union with the soul and its vital contributions to the mystical quest, the body is not excluded from transformation to incorruptible life:[676]

> Having now completed the stage of growth, the soul receives the kind of incorruptible nourishment which sustains the god-like perfection granted to it, and receives a state of eternal well-being. Then the infinite splendours inherent in this nourishment are revealed to the soul, and it becomes god by participation in divine grace, ceasing from all activity of intellect and sense, and at the same time suspending all the natural operations of the body. For the body is deified along with the soul through its own corresponding participation in the process of deification. Thus God alone is made manifest through the soul and the body, since their natural properties have been overcome by the superabundance of His glory.[677]

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[674] Thunberg (1995), p. 399.
[675] Thunberg (1995), p. 100.
[676] Cooper (2005), p. 102.
[677] Maximus, *CT* 2.88, in *Philokalia* 2, p. 160.

Just as the nave is an integral part of the church and provides access to the sanctuary and the altar, just as the divine mountain cannot be ascended without first climbing its lower slopes, so God cannot be apprehended without the body. Maximus never excludes our embodied existence from the luminous encounter with Divinity. As in Christ, God shines forth through the perfection of human nature in its entirety. The body is the site where the accomplishment of the divine plan is manifested.[678] In this capacity, it is of great importance.

To answer the question of how exactly the body assists in the ascent to God, we need only take another look at Maximus' explication of the human composite as a mystical church. As seen in the above citation from the *Mystagogia*, he proposes that "through the nave which is his body he [the Christian] brightens by virtue the ascetic force of the soul by the observance of the commandments in moral wisdom."[679] Maximus suggests that knowledge of God which is dependent on the pursuit of the active life, i.e. the keeping of the commandments and the acquisition of virtue, is rooted in the body. The practice of the virtues, including bodily virtues which feature, among others, the ministering to people's needs,[680] enables seekers to serve divine love.[681] The practice of virtue allows Christians to engage in acts of forgiveness, almsgiving, and intercession. Embodied existence facilitates exchanges with fellow beings which, if cultivated and deepened, foster assimilation to God. The inherent link between the physical and the relational dimensions of Christian life and their joined role in bringing about a person's transformation is elucidated by Brown in the following words:

> The rhythms of the body and, with the body, his concrete social relations determined the life of the monk: his continued economic dependence on the settled world for food, the hard school of day-to-day collaboration with his fellow-ascetics in

[678] Nichols (1993), p. 157.
[679] Maximus, *Myst* 4, in Berthold (1985), p. 190.
[680] Maximus, *CC* 2.57, in *Philokalia* 2, p. 75.
[681] Cooper (2005), p. 235.

> shared rhythms of labor, and mutual exhortation in the monasteries slowly changed his personality.[682]

Maximus deepens his discussion of the body as a tool of mystical ascent by indicating that the pursuit of virtue enables Christians to experience a second incarnation, an incarnation in the virtues: "The divine Logos, who once for all was born in the flesh, always in His compassion desires to be born in spirit in those who desire Him. He becomes an infant and moulds Himself in them through the virtues."[683] Once again, Maximus brings to the fore the importance of living the virtuous life, a life which, as we have just seen, is based on embodied existence. Daily immersion in good works allows seekers to imitate Christ and to manifest God-like attributes. As Christ grows within them, they secure their movement toward Divinity and toward deification.[684] Maximus harbors deep respect for the body, its ability to initiate the growth of virtue, and, by doing so, its capacity to heal human fragmentation.

The reality of physical existence presents humans with constant challenges. These challenges, whether of a physical or of a social nature, are the arena in which a person's devotion to God is tested. As suggested by Brown, embodied existence provides the setting in which human consciousness is altered. Maximus' ascetical doctrine attests to this understanding of human transformation. Like many of his predecessors, he proposed that perfection is forged within a practical, corporeal, and communal context. Deification implies daily encounters with the body and with fellow beings. It implies the ability to respond to these encounters with humility and love.

Throughout the discussion of Maximus' mystical thought, we have revisited teachings considered in earlier chapters. We have seen how the seventh century theologian elaborated on these teachings and incorporated them into his own system. On the one hand, we could argue that Maximus' ability to unite Origenian and Syrian

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[682] Brown (1988), p. 237.
[683] Maximus, *VT* 1.8, in *Philokalia* 2, pp. 165-166.
[684] Thunberg (1985), p. 108.

features with great mastery suggests his gift as an astute theologian and synthesizer, which, no doubt, he was. But we might also propose that the task of joining elements of Christianity's two mystical legacies was eased by their inherent compatibility. As indicated throughout this study, both sets of teachings were articulated with the intention of showing how humans might overcome inner fragmentation by embracing the virtuous life and by seeking the purification of their inner selves. Both legacies envisioned prayer as a vital tool of progressing toward perfection and of perceiving the all-embracing presence of Divinity. They spoke of prayer as an act of spiritual worship which transforms the Christian into a divine temple. Proponents of the Greek and of the Syrian mystical strand viewed the daily challenges of embodied, communal existence as unique opportunities to imitate Christ and to attain oneness with God.

Maximus elucidated these ideas with unprecedented insight and clarity. His familiarity with the Origenian tradition provided him with the philosophical learnedness to refine Evagrius' views on Christian anthropology and spiritual advancement. The Origenian legacy taught him how theoretical constructs might be placed within a practical context and guide the faithful toward participation in divine life. It introduced him to the biblical glory tradition and its closely related temple imagery in its interiorized form.

Through the study of the Syrian mystical legacy, Maximus was able to deepen his inquiry into the scriptural tradition of the heart. He was able to explore more fully the emotive dimension of the ascetical life and to observe how the greatest of virtues, love, might propel the soul into the presence of God. While he encountered many of these elements in the teachings of the Greek Christian world, the heart-centered language of Syrian ascetics, from Aphrahat to Dionysius, infused his teaching with a new degree of tenderness and feeling. The writings of Syrian masters inspired Maximus to place his mystical doctrine within a liturgical context and to insist on the holistic conception of human nature. By doing so and by pointing to the incarnation as a pivotal event which ushered in a new mode of human existence, Maximus articulated a doctrine of prayer that invited a deeply personal, ecstatic encounter with God yet did not call for the negation of a person's social and material surrounding. Union with the Unknowable had its humble beginnings in practical, day-to-day existence. The blessed were rapt out-

side themselves at the pinnacle of the quest for perfection and granted the supreme gift of deification only after toiling long and arduously in the physical, communal here and now.

Perhaps it is this aspect of Maximus' mystical doctrine, i.e. the idea that divine intimacy depends on the embodied, relational nature of Christian existence, that benefits contemporary seekers the most. Like the teaching of his Greek and Syrian predecessors, Maximus' theology reminds today's mystical pilgrims of the fact that the quest for God is rooted in the challenges of daily life. By meeting these challenges, they are able to reach beyond former limitations and to assimilate to their divine model. Seekers are given the opportunity to transcend human conflict and to engage in the God-given task of mediating between warring factions. The implications of such a doctrine are profound. Commitment to a life of inner prayer as envisioned by Maximus promises to reconcile humans with themselves and with fellow beings. It promises greater unity on a microcosmic and macrocosmic level. In a world, such as ours, in which the resolution of human strife is ever a concern, Maximus' teaching serves as a constant source of hope and inspiration.

5 RETROSPECTIVE AND PROSPECTIVE

THE DESERT TRADITION

Throughout this study, we have considered the influence of Greek Christian and Syrian Christian thought on the tradition of the prayer of the heart. In the exploration of the biblical motif of the heart, its early Christian usage, its interpretation as God's temple, and its inherent link with embodied, relational existence, we have not had occasion to examine the impact that the Christian teachers of late antique Egypt exerted over this ancient tradition. While we examined the ascetical theology of Evagrius, a writer who owed much to the teachings of the Egyptian desert fathers, we did so primarily with the intention of tracing the influence of Origenian thought on his mystical doctrine. The following brief discussion of the desert tradition is presented in the hope of rectifying this omission in some small measure and of allowing for fuller coverage of the prayer of the heart. A glance ahead at Byzantine hesychasm, which is to follow this retrospective, will round off the chapter and highlight the debt of medieval ascetics to early Christian thought.

As we begin our inquiry into the mystical teaching of late antique Egypt, it is helpful to call attention to the important synthesizing role that the desert tradition played from the fifth century onward.[685] Reasons for this development are largely of a textual nature. By the fifth century, Syrian literature on prayer had begun to be available in the Greek language. Simultaneously, the teachings of the Origenian tradition were becoming more widely known. McGuckin describes the effect of this development in the following manner:

[685] McGuckin (2001), p. 55.

> Both Syrian and Origenian Christian thought came into close proximity in Egypt with local African patterns of spirituality. The resultant mix was potent, and characterized a richly polychromatic spiritual doctrine after the late fourth century which Byzantium adopted and exported to the wider Christian world.[686]

If we take a moment to consider the teaching of Egyptian abbas prior to the fifth century, we encounter a doctrine that is characterized by a deep awareness of the necessity for inner purity and for the constant guarding of the heart against the pouring in of demonic thoughts. This predominantly "Niptic"[687] approach is exemplified in the following passages:

> The first work of a monk is to offer pure prayer to God with nothing reprehensible on his conscience. . . . Then if, as we said before, we stand before God with a pure heart and free from all the passions and vices we have mentioned, we can, insofar as this is possible, see even God. [688]

> I want you to know, my children, that I cease not to pray to God for you night and day, that He may open for you the eyes of your hearts, to see the many hidden malignities which the evil spirits pour upon us daily in this present time. I want God to give you a heart of knowledge and a spirit of discernment, that you may be able to offer your hearts as a pure sacrifice before the Father, in great holiness and without blemish.[689]

The above citations address the importance of becoming aware of demonic schemings, of preventing the ignition of distorting passions, and of approaching God with a watchful, knowing

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[686] McGuckin (2001), p. 55.

[687] As McGuckin points out, the "Niptic" tradition is concerned with guarding the heart's awareness against the stream of defiling passions that prevents deep contemplation of God; see McGuckin (1999), p. 76.

[688] *The Additions of Rufinus* I 22-28, in *The Lives of the Desert Fathers,* trans. Norman Russell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1981), p. 146.

[689] Antony, *Letters* 6, in *Antony the Great: The Letters of St. Antony*, trans. Derwas J. Chitty (Oxford: SLG Press, 1975), p. 18.

heart. The first generation of Egyptian desert fathers was acutely aware of the need to preserve the heart's purity, a biblical teaching which, as we have seen, also features prominently in early Christian Greek and Syrian thought. The above citations, especially the latter words by the renowned desert father Antony, also reintroduce us to the by now familiar idea of the heart as a liturgical site. A passage by Ammonas, Antony's great disciple, further suggests that the concept of the heart as a place of divine revelation, although not yet fully developed, is not absent from the writings of the early abbas:

> Night and day I pray that the power of God may increase in you, and reveal to you the great mysteries of the Godhead, which it is not easy for me to utter with the tongue, because they are great and are not of this world, and are not revealed save only to those who have purified their hearts from every defilement.[690]

Yet despite mention of the heart as a site of theophany, the earliest Egyptian fathers drew on the biblical tradition of the heart primarily to encourage the guarding of thoughts, the discernment of evil, and the adherence to ascetical practice.[691] They did so without presenting a coherent doctrine of inner prayer. Advice on the purification of the heart and on engagement in prayer was still unsystematic and spontaneous. Ascetics seeking divine aide were encouraged to

> Just stretch out your hands and say "Lord, as you will and as you know best, have mercy." And if the conflict grows fiercer, say "Lord, help!" He knows very well what we need and he shows us his mercy.[692]

For a more detailed exposition on the inner path of prayer and for greater emphasis on the purified heart as the altar of God's radiant presence, we have to look beyond the Niptic writings of the

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[690] Ammonas, *Letters* 6, in *The Letters of Ammonas, Successor of Saint Anton,* trans. Derwas J. Chitty (Oxford: SLG Press, 1979), p. 7.

[691] McGuckin (1999), p. 79.

[692] *Macarius the Great* 19, in Ward (1984), p. 131.

early desert fathers to the later Sinaic tradition.[693] Here, we encounter the work of John Climacus (c. 575-c. 650), the Abbot of Sinai monastery, who, in *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, provides systematic guidance on the quest for higher psychic awareness. The following words reveal the ascetic's insight into the nature of spiritual advancement. They also indicate his familiarity with the biblical temple motif and its interiorization:

> To keep a regular watch over the heart is one thing; to guard the heart by means of the mind is another for the mind is the ruler and high priest offering spiritual sacrifices to Christ. When heaven's holy fire lays hold of the former, it burns them because they still lack purification. . . . But as for the latter, it enlightens them in proportion to the perfection they have achieved. It is one and the same fire that is called that which consumes (cf. Heb. 12:29) and that which illuminates (cf. John 1:9).[694]

A further prominent theologian of the Sinaic tradition is the eighth century Abbot Hesychius. Like John Climacus, Hesychius gives detailed instruction on the pursuit of the mystical life and discusses the biblical notion of the heart by emphasizing the need for the constant purification of this inner dimension and its vital function as a place of divine theophany. Hesychius writes:

> We have learned from experience that for one who wishes to purify his heart it is a truly great blessing constantly to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus against his intelligible enemies. Notice how what I speak of from experience concurs with the testimony of Scripture. . . . Our Lord Himself says: 'Without Me you can do nothing. If a man dwells in Me, and I in him, then he brings forth much fruit'; . . . Prayer is a great blessing, and it

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[693] McGuckin (2001), p. 61.

[694] John Climacus, *Ladder* 28*,* in John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), p. 280.

> embraces all blessings, for it purifies the heart, in which God is seen by the believer.[695]

On the one hand, the writings of John Climacus and Hesychius are of interest for expounding on the scriptural concept of the heart and for suggesting its interiorization, a feature which we have come to associate with much early Christian mystical thought. At the same time, they are of great value for providing concrete instruction on the invocation of the holy name. As suggested by Hesychius' above words, the repetition of the Lord's name was considered a crucial aid against demonic attack. Both theologians believed that this practice kept the mind preoccupied and facilitated the undistracted meditation on God. It was an explicit confession of faith through which seekers entered into a personal relationship with the incarnate Logos.[696] The continual recitation of the holy name, accompanied by a deep sense of *penthos* and an appeal for God's mercy,[697] was the strongest of weapons in heaven and on earth.[698] It allowed Christians to chastise their enemies and to procure divine protection.

John Climacus as well as Hesychius are of lasting significance to the dissemination of the Jesus Prayer, as the invocation of the Lord's name came to be known.[699] Their contributions are all the greater for having introduced to this practice a physical dimension. Hesychius advised his disciples to combat evil by letting the words of prayer "cleave to your breath."[700] Here, we may have a first indication that early Christians sought to overcome demonic maneuvers and to deepen relations with God by relying on the somatic technique of coordinating the words uttered in prayer with the rhythm of the breath.[701] Similar advice is given by John Climacus,

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[695] Hesychius of Sinai, *Watchfulness* 62, in *Philokalia* 1, p. 173.

[696] Ware (1997c), p. 403.

[697] Ware (1997c), p. 404.

[698] John Climacus, *Ladder 21,* in Luibheid and Russell (1982), p. 200.

[699] The most common form of the Jesus Prayer is the recitation of the short phrase "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me."

[700] Hesychius of Sinai, *Watchfulness* 182, in *Philokalia* 1, pp. 194-195.

[701] Ware (1997c), p. 408.

who cautioned novices to "let the remembrance of Jesus be present with your every breath."[702]

Two further ascetical teachers who are of interest to this discussion of the desert tradition and its important role in shaping the prayer of the heart are the fifth century Bishop of Photike, Diadochus,[703] and the sixth century Archimandrite of Gaza, Dorotheus.[704]

Diadochus' contributions are of a twofold nature. He made ample use of the Jesus Prayer, believing that the repetition of the same formula was essential if the intellect was to be brought from a diversity of thoughts and images to a state of single-pointed concentration on God.[705] By replacing the array of monologistic formulae commonly used among the early desert fathers with the uniform invocation of the holy name, Diadochus accelerated the spread of the Jesus Prayer, which came to be viewed (and continues to be viewed) as the prayer *par excellence* of Eastern Christian Orthodoxy. Its simplicity was seen as a powerful tool of reaching "beyond language into silence, beyond discursive thinking into intuitive awareness":[706]

> When we have blocked all its outlets by means of the remembrance of God, the intellect requires of us imperatively some task which will satisfy its need for activity. For the complete fulfillment of its purpose we should give it nothing but the prayer 'Lord Jesus'. 'No one', it is written, 'can say "Lord Jesus" except in the Holy Spirit' (1 Cor. 12:3). Let the intellect continually concentrate on these words within its inner shrine with such intensity that it is not turned aside to any mental im-

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[702] John Climacus, *Ladder* 27*,* in Luibheid and Russell (1982), p. 270.

[703] Although Photike is located in Greece, Diadochus appears to have had close contact with the desert tradition and, for this reason, has been included in this discussion; see McGuckin (2001), p. 62.

[704] Dorotheus was a Syrian by origin but became closely associated with the desert tradition after his arrival in Egypt to study with famous spiritual elders; see McGuckin (2001), p. 70.

[705] Ware (1986), p. 178.

[706] Ware (1986), p. 178.

> ages. Those who meditate unceasingly upon this glorious and holy name in the depths of their heart can sometimes see the light of their own intellect.[707]

From the above lines, we can infer that Diadochus was of importance to the tradition of the prayer of the heart not only for championing the use of the holy name but also for articulating a doctrine of inner prayer that synthesized elements of Greek and Syrian Christian mystical teachings. The concept of the *nous* was as familiar to him as biblical heart language. His emphasis on prayer as the laying aside of thoughts and mental images is clearly Evagrian in inspiration, as is his belief that the Jesus Prayer allows practitioners to attain a vision of "the light of their own intellect." Particularly reminiscent of Syrian mystical teachings—even if not absent from the writings of Origenian theologians—is Diadochus' interest in the liturgical conceptualization of the heart in terms of an inner shrine. His commitment to the felt experience of God, a sentiment that can be detected throughout his writings, is likewise suggestive of Syrian influences, although it is once again important to note that this feature is also present in the works of noetic authors.

With Dorotheus, the chief disciple of the renowned spiritual elders Barsanuphius and John of Gaza, we encounter yet another great synthesizer of the Egyptian desert. Like Diadochus, he was instrumental in the joining of Christianity's Greek, Egyptian, and Syrian mystical strands for later Byzantine monasticism.[708] Like Diadochus, Dorotheus suggested that the Jesus Prayer was an all-important means of remembering Divinity continually and of inviting its revelation in the human heart. He, too, looked to this inner region as the spiritual center of human beings. In the heart, ascetical practitioners drew uniquely close to God and perceived the pouring in of divine grace. The visceral nature of this experience is

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[707] Diadochus of Photike, *On Spiritual Knowledge* 59, in *Philokalia* 1, p. 270.

[708] McGuckin (2001), p. 71.

conveyed in an account which Dorotheus supplied of his own transformative encounter with the Lord. He writes:

> Then he stood in front of me and, stretching out his hand, touched me on the breast and tapped me on the chest with his fingers, saying:
>
> I waited, I waited for the Lord
> And he stooped down to me;
> He heard my cry.
> He drew me from the deadly pit,
> from the mirery clay.
> He set my feet upon a rock
> and made my footsteps firm.
> He put a new song into my mouth, [a song of]
> praise of our God.
>
> He repeated all these verses three times, tapping me on the chest, as I said. Then he departed. And immediately light flooded my mind and there was joy in my heart with comfort and sweetness. I was a different man.[709]

As indicated by this passage, Dorotheus was very aware of the physical dimension of inner prayer. For him, as for many of his predecessors, the presence of Divinity manifested itself on a somatic level. Likewise suggestive of earlier theologians was Dorotheus' insistence on the inherently relational setting of a prayerful existence. Exposure to a tightly knit social network served to reshape a person's inner world and to guide the soul toward spiritual advancement. Ordinary communal life gave all Christians, each in their own right, the opportunity to seek reconciliation with fellow beings and with God:

> If we are one body each is a member of the other. . . . Let each one give assistance to the body according to his ability and take care to help one another, whether it is a matter of teaching and

[709] Dorotheus of Gaza, *Disc* 5, in *Dorotheus of Gaza: Discourses and Sayings*, trans. Eric P. Wheeler (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publicatons, 1977), p. 128.

> putting the word of God into the heart of a brother, or of consoling him in time of trouble or of giving a hand with work and helping him. In a word, as I was saying, each one according to his means should take care to be at one with everyone else, for the more one is united to his neighbor the more he is united to God.[710]

The above inquiry into the mystical teachings of the early Christian desert tradition, while cursory, has hopefully indicated some of the ways in which these teachings contributed to the shaping of the prayer of the heart. The earliest Egyptian abbas are of particular renown for emphasizing the need to watch over the heart so as to protect it against distracting thoughts and distorting passions. The later spiritual elders, for their part, are of great interest for advocating the uniform invocation of the Lord's name and, hence, for disseminating the Jesus Prayer. They proposed that the recitation of this brief prayer was the quintessential means of expressing sorrow over past sins and of appealing for divine mercy. The Jesus Prayer enabled ascetics to move beyond the clamor of demonic voices and to enter a state of stillness in which God's presence could be discerned.

The somatic dimension with which ascetics of the desert tradition endowed the practice of inner prayer accelerated this process and insured that the prayer of the heart never lost its essentially embodied character. The intermarriage of this particular Egyptian feature with the holistic outlook of Greek and Syrian mystical thought established the Jesus Prayer as a powerful means of worshipping God in a truly integral fashion. The teaching of desert fathers, such as Dorotheus, which advanced the need for human relatedness vouchsafed that the practice of inner prayer was to facilitate not only the unity of body and soul but also of the individual and the community.

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[710] Dorotheus of Gaza, *Disc* 6, in Wheeler (1977), p. 138.

THE MEDIEVAL HESYCHASTS

The desert tradition, while similar to the Greek and Syrian traditions in many respects, distinguished itself from these by proposing that the uniform invocation of the Lord's name become the primary means of entering into transformative relations with God. The prominence that Egyptian elders, especially elders of later generations, placed on the Jesus Prayer and its somatic techniques proved to be deeply influential. Foremost among subsequent advocates of this particular form of prayer were the medieval hesychasts. For them, as for their Egyptian predecessors, the continuous recitation of the holy name was a vital tool for experiencing the direct presence of Divinity. To elucidate the degree to which Byzantine hesychasts drew on Egyptian as well as Greek and Syrian ascetical thought in order to articulate their doctrine of inner prayer, we will now consider the teaching of three medieval authors, Symeon the New Theologian, Gregory of Sinai, and Gregory Palamas. Since the objective is not to explore their teaching in any depth but rather to point to instances in which its debt to early Christian thought is particularly pronounced, this will be but a brief discussion.

Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022) entered the monastic life after experiencing overwhelming visions of light and seeing the radiance of Christ directly.[711] This biographical note addresses a major feature of the theologian's mystical teaching. For Symeon, the direct, personal experience of God was of the utmost importance. He insisted that only people who have experienced the vision of light are qualified to teach and to guide novices along the mystical path. "Knowledge," he argued, "is not the light! Rather, it is the light that is knowledge."[712] And yet, he pointed out, "we shamelessly presume to teach the multitude about the light of

[711] McGuckin (2001), p. 110.

[712] Symeon the New Theologian, *Disc* 28.7, in *Symeon the New Theologian: The Discourses*, trans. C. J. deCatanzaro (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 301.

knowledge, and even to show them the light of knowledge itself!"[713]

Symeon's emphasis on the direct experience of Divinity and his proposition that the deifying union with God is characterized by radiant light is strongly reminiscent of early Christian teachings we have considered in this study. We cannot but be reminded of the many instances in which Greek, Syrian, and, given our brief prior discussion, Egyptian ascetics of the ancient church subordinated the intellectual inquiry into the nature of the divine to its visceral perception. We cannot fail to recall the many early Christian references to the encounter with God in terms of a luminous experience, evoking Macarius' theology of light in particular.

A further feature that is prominent in Symeon's mystical doctrine and that suggests a debt to earlier teachings is his emphasis on the passionate nature of the divine-human relationship. Symeon's devotion to Christ as the soul's mentor and companion was pronounced. The Son of God, he proposed, serves as guide to all Christians who have turned their backs on sin and yearn for divine communion. Symeon writes:

> Let us all from now on seek Him, who alone is capable of freeing us from our shackles!
> And let us eagerly desire Him, whose beauty fills all thoughts and every heart
> with wonder, wounds all souls and wings them towards love.
> It attaches and unites them with God forever.
> Yes, my brothers, run by means of your actions towards Him,
> yes, my friends, stand up, yes, do not be outstripped.[714]

The emphasis Symeon places on the soul's deep longing for intimate contact with Christ endows his teaching with a distinctly heart-centered tenor. In the heart, God draws uniquely close to humankind and is apprehended viscerally. Here, Deity takes up permanent residence and imparts its heavenly glory:

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[713] Symeon the New Theologian, *Disc* 28.7, in deCatanzaro (1980), p. 301.

[714] Symeon the New Theologian, *Hymns* 27, in Maloney (1976), pp. 144-145.

In amazement, I admire the splendor of His beauty,
and how, having opened the heavens, the Creator inclined
and showed me His glory, indescribable, marvelous.
And so who would draw nearer to Him?
Or how would he be carried away towards measureless heights?
While I reflect on this, He Himself is discovered within myself,
resplendent in the interior of my miserable heart,
illuminating me on all sides with His immortal splendor,
completely intertwined with me, He embraces me totally.[715]

In accordance with the writings of Christian authors considered in this study, Symeon is greatly invested in the reconceptualization of the biblical glory tradition and views the heart as a site of divine theophany and an interior altar. Like the church and the exterior altar, it serves as Christ's tabernacle.[716] If the Savior is made present to the liturgical assembly during the celebration of the Eucharist, he manifests himself equally in the hearts of the faithful. The physical as well as the spiritual temple allow for a person's assimilation to Christ and oneness with God.

Symeon's interest in the temple motif is of importance not only for heralding its interiorization but also for revealing the theologian's deep devotion to the liturgy of the church, in particular to the Eucharist. According to Symeon, the reception of the body and blood of Christ is an all-important means by which Christians assimilate to their Savior. Participation in the Eucharistic rite implies the mingling of human flesh with the body of Christ.[717] Conformity to the Lord is of lasting consequence in every respect, including the physical:

How have You clothed me with the brilliant garment,

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[715] Symeon the New Theologian, *Hymns* 16, in Maloney (1976), p. 58.

[716] Alexander Golitzin, "The Body of Christ: Saint Symeon the New Theologian on Spiritual Life and the Hierarchical Church," a lecture given at the International Conference on St. Symeon the New Theologian at Bose, September 2002, http://www.marquette.edu/maqom/symeon.html, p. 4.

[717] McGuckin (2001), pp. 116-117.

vivid with the splendor of immortality,
which changes all my members into light?
. . . . . .
I am beyond myself thinking
what I was, what I have become—O marvel!
I am attentive, I experience within me a respect,
a reverence, a fear, as if in Your presence,
and I do not know what to do, having become all timid;
where to sit down, whom to approach
and where to place these members which are Yours.[718]

In his regard for the human body which, as the above lines suggest, can become one with the glorified body of the Lord, Symeon mirrors the holistic outlook of his predecessors. He, too, views the body as God's temple and as a valuable instrument of spiritual advancement. With Symeon, we encounter a theologian who believed that all of human nature is transfigured and illumined by the glory of God, for "the soul, when dispassionate, sanctifies the body with its own luminosity and with the radiance of the Holy Spirit."[719]

Symeon also embraced the relational dimension of Christian existence. On the one hand, this feature is exemplified by the liturgical orientation of his doctrine. For the Byzantine theologian, mystical theology and ecclesial theology were closely interwoven. By joining the fellowship of the mystery and by partaking of the Eucharist, ascetics embarked on a life of active service and communal outreach, designed to facilitate direct contact with Divinity.

The relational nature of Symeon's theology is further emphasized by his insistence on the need for a spiritual guide. The eleventh century monk did not believe that the quest for God can be undertaken in isolation and looked to the spiritual elder as an important companion throughout the arduous quest for divine intimacy. Spiritual guides, he proposed, hold multiple functions and

[718] Symeon the New Theologian, *Hymns* 2, in Maloney (1976), p. 17.

[719] Symeon the New Theologian, *PT* 58, in *Philokalia* 4, trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), p. 36.

serve as physicians, counselors, intercessors, mediators, and sponsors of the soul.[720] As physicians, they care for the soul that has fallen ill and nurture it back to health. As teachers, they suggest appropriate ways of repentance and purification. Through prayer, spiritual elders mediate between their charges and God. Like all church fathers examined in these pages, Symeon was convinced that spiritual development depends on the guidance and mediating activity of Christians further advanced along the mystical path. Individuals who have experienced the vision of radiant glory firsthand are in a unique position to sensitize seekers to expressions of divine life in themselves and in the created order.

These brief comments on key elements of Symeon's ascetical thought have hopefully shown that the theologian drew on many early Christian teachings to present a doctrine that was experiential, heart-centered, and holistic in approach. In many respects, Symeon was deeply indebted to Origen and Evagrius. He adopted their triadic outline of the mystical path and viewed the progressive purification, illumination, and perfection of a person's innermost self as the quintessential means of drawing into the presence of God. Symeon believed that only a person who has won the Christian battle against demonic thoughts and wayward impulses can enter a state of inner stillness and restore the soul's divine image to its original splendor.

But Symeon was no less indebted to Christianity's Syrian heritage. In his emphasis on the need for purity of heart, on God's movement to take command of a person's essential self, and on the radiant nature of the encounter with Divinity, the theologian drew on elements especially pronounced in the mystical thought of this early Christian tradition. He also paid tribute to the ascetical teaching of the ancient Syrian church by emphasizing the passionate nature of the divine-human encounter, although it is worth reiterating that Origen's description of the soul's union with Divinity was every bit as passionate. Symeon's insistence on inner purity and on the need to pay close attention to the physical stirrings of the heart during prayer also suggests familiarity with the theology of the de-

[720] Irénée Hausherr, *Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cisterican Publications, 1990), p. xii.

sert tradition. Likewise reminiscent of Egyptian teaching is his understanding of prayer as the continual remembrance and invocation of the Lord.[721]

Symeon's mystical doctrine proved to be deeply influential and became a constitutive part of later Athonite monasticism. It prepared the way for the full blossoming of the prayer of the heart in thirteenth and fourteenth century Byzantium.[722] The theologian's teaching guaranteed that his hesychast successors would be ever committed to the experiential encounter with God. Moreover, like him, they were to articulate an ascetical doctrine that viewed the body and the community as vital to union with Divinity. At the forefront of these theologians was Gregory of Sinai (*c.* 1255-1346), a hesychast who presented a teaching greatly invested in the physical dimension of inner prayer. Let us take a moment to consider prominent features of his legacy.

Reminiscent of Symeon the New Theologian, Gregory of Sinai looked to the thought of his early Christian predecessors to articulate a doctrine on the soul's deifying union with God. This doctrine was characterized by an abiding belief in prayer as an interior liturgy celebrated in the sanctuary of the heart. For Gregory, prayer was a means of offering up "the Lamb of God upon the altar of the soul."[723] Prayer was "a joyous fire kindled in the heart"[724] and "a vigorous sweet-scented light."[725] If Gregory's association of prayer with the heart, with light, and with fire suggests Syrian influences, his characterization of prayer in terms of "the noetic activity of the intellect"[726] and of "the origin of true and absolute Wisdom"[727] reveals familiarity with Greek Christian terminology. Like Symeon, but also like theologians of the early church, Gregory presented his teaching on the luminous encounter with

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[721] Symeon the New Theologian, *PT* 140, in *Philokalia* 4, p. 56.
[722] McGuckin (2001), p. 117.
[723] Gregory of Sinai, *Commandments* 112, in *Philokalia* 4, p. 237.
[724] Gregory of Sinai, *Commandments* 113, in *Philokalia* 4, p. 237.
[725] Gregory of Sinai, *Commandments* 113, in *Philokalia* 4, p. 237.
[726] Gregory of Sinai, *Commandments* 113, in *Philokalia* 4, p. 237.
[727] Gregory of Sinai, *Commandments* 113, in *Philokalia* 4, p. 237.

God in the human heart by drawing on philosophical as well as biblical language.

Gregory also looked to the ascetical doctrine of the church fathers to present his views on the body and its prominent role in the soul's progressive transformation. Ever committed to the holistic conception of human nature, he drew attention to the physical dimension of the mystical life and the innate unity of the material and the spiritual realm by suggesting that the words uttered in prayer be correlated with the movement of breath. In his emphasis on the usage of this somatic technique, he was especially indebted to the teaching of the Egyptian desert fathers. Drawing on John Climacus and Hesychius, Gregory advised his audience to "let mindfulness of Jesus be united to your breathing, and then you will know the blessings of stillness."[728] As a further means of heightening practitioners' sense of the body and its role in the facilitation of divine intimacy, Gregory suggested that they pay careful attention to their physical heart beat and conceive of it as a metronome which keeps time in parallel with individual breaths and the silent words of prayer.[729]

Awareness of breath and the beating of the heart during prayer was one valuable device Gregory advocated to heighten a person's capacity to focus on God. The Byzantine hesychast took the idea that assimilation to Christ involves the physical dimension of human existence one step further by suggesting that practitioners adopt a specific bodily posture during prayer. He proposed that sitting on a seat about nine inches high, with head tucked into chest, facilitated the process of drawing the intellect down into the heart and of quieting the clamor of demonic voices.[730] The posture of the body helped the mind to extricate itself from the teeming thoughts with which it was afflicted and allowed for the entry of an inner stillness in which God's presence could be discerned. For Gregory, something as seemingly inconsequential as physical posture had a profound effect on our spiritual state and opened the path to a greater dimension of reality.

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[728] Gregory of Sinai, *Watchfulness* 3, in *Philokalia* 4, p. 265.
[729] McGuckin (2001), p. 118.
[730] Gregory of Sinai, *Watchfulness* 2, in *Philokalia* 4, p. 264.

By synthesizing the mystical doctrine of his ancestors and deepening its body-centered outlook, Gregory contributed greatly to the flowering of the prayer of the heart. Especially his teaching on the use of somatic tools, tools which were first introduced by the desert fathers and which Gregory embraced whole-heartedly, proved to be of lasting influence. A further figure of great importance to the propagation of early Christian teachings on inner prayer was Gregory Palamas (*c.* 1296-1359), a priest, theologian, and avid defender of the Athonite monastic tradition. Gregory was the most theological of the hesychast founding fathers,[731] and, as we will see in the upcoming pages, supplied hesychasm with a substantial theological frame of reference.

A true disciple of his early Christian forefathers, Gregory Palamas placed great emphasis on experiential knowledge of God in prayer. He harbored a deep belief that, even in this age, humans can participate in the divine mysteries and the angelic liturgy through prayer.[732] In unison with his predecessors and with Dionysius in particular, Gregory insisted on God's utter incomprehensibility. For him, the immediate perception of God remained, at heart, a mystery. While Gregory believed that humans are capable of experiencing direct contact with Divinity through its energies, he argued that its essence remains forever hidden.[733]

Like Symeon and Gregory of Sinai, Gregory Palamas was a skillful synthesizer of Christianity's mystical legacies, and he demonstrated the ability to join elements of the Greek and the Syrian Christian strands in his anthropological teaching. Drawing on the Origenian notion of the *nous* as well as on biblical heart language, Gregory proposed that humans effect their progressive deification by pulling the *nous* down into the heart. If the mind returns to itself, that is, if it escapes the grips of passion and focuses all of its

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[731] McGuckin (2001), p. 123.

[732] Gregory Palamas, *Topics of Natural and Theological Science and on the Moral and Ascetical Life: One Hundred and Fifty Texts* 76, in *Philokalia* 4, p. 381.

[733] Gregory Palamas, *Tr* 3.2.5-15, in *Gregory Palamas: The Triads*, trans. Nicholas Gendle (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), pp. 93-111.

attention on Divinity,[734] it is able to journey back to the heart, to discover therein the inner image of God, and to make this interior region its true home. According to Gregory, the ability of the intellect to nestle in the heart allows Christians to enter the "sacred kingdom of love"[735] and to experience divine grace viscerally. Gregory's ability to balance the concepts of *nous* and *kardia* attests to his fluency in Greek as well as Syrian Christian thought.

Gregory further demonstrated mastery of both sets of teaching in his doctrine on the soul's ascent into the presence of God. Distinct Origenian and Evagrian influences can be detected in his emphasis on the necessity to combat *logismoi* and the uncontrollable desires they evoke. Greek Christian doctrine also guided his views on the virtuous life and on the need to attain dispassion. The following words, in which Gregory addresses the inner state of the hesychast who has entered the stage of illumination, reveal the extent of his debt to the noetic mystical tradition and its doctrine on the soul's triadic progression:

> This gives birth to a godlike, unmatched and stable state of virtue as well as to a disposition that has no or little inclination to sin. It is then that the intellect is illuminated by the divine Logos who enables it to perceive clearly the inner essences—the *logoi*—of created things and on account of its purity reveals to it the mysteries of nature. In this way, through relationships of correspondence the perceiving and trusting intelligence is raised up to the apprehension of supranatural realities, an apprehension that the Father of the Logos communicates through an immaterial union.[736]

Gregory's reference in the above citation to the progressive illumination of the intellect and to its ability to discern ever more

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[734] Gregory Palamas, *Three Texts on Prayer and Purity of Heart* 2, in *Philokalia* 4, p. 343.

[735] Gregory Palamas, *Treatise on the Spiritual Life* 6, 11, in *Gregory Palamas: Treatise on the Spiritual Life*, trans. Daniel M. Rogich (Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life Publishing Company, 1995), p. 53, n. 90, p. 85.

[736] Gregory Palamas, *To the Most Revered Nun Xenia* 62, in *Philokalia* 4, p. 318.

clearly the archetypal reality of the universe vividly calls to mind the mystical teaching of Origen and Evagrius. Other Gregorian writings have a distinctly Syrian tenor and suggest his deep commitment to biblical lore:

> If, as the Psalmist says, 'All the glory of the king's daughter is within' (Ps. 45:13 LXX), how shall we seek it somewhere without? And if, as St Paul says, 'God has sent forth His Spirit into our hearts, crying: "Abba Father"' (cf. Gal. 4:6), how shall we not pray in union with the Spirit that is in our hearts? . . . 'An upright heart', says Solomon, 'seeks conscious awareness' (cf. Prov. 27:21 LXX), the awareness or perception which he elsewhere calls noetic and divine (cf. Prov. 2:5 LXX).[737]

These examples, while brief, allow us to observe Gregory's loyalty to the Hellenic and Semitic heritage of Christianity's mystical tradition. In some instances, the theologian drew on Greek terminology to present his teaching on the soul's ascent. On other occasions, he favored the biblical notion of the heart. Like so many of his predecessors, Gregory believed that noetic and heart-centered language captured the same divine reality. Reference to the illuminated intellect as well as to the upright heart suggested an inner transformative process that culminated in the deification of human nature.

Gregory's commitment to the mystical legacies of the ancient church does not end here. He, too, adopted a distinctly pro-body stance. Taking the incarnation as his starting point and hailing its life-giving properties, the theologian insisted that the Christ-event allowed for the transfiguration of the whole person, body and soul. The soul "uses as an instrument the body, which by nature coexists with it."[738] For Gregory, the body was never an inherent evil. Through its enfleshment, the Logos established a new relation with creation and gave all matter, including the body, the potential to serve as a vehicle of the Spirit. Revitalized by the latter, the body was able to conform to its model, the incarnate Christ, and to be-

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[737] Gregory Palamas, *In Defense of Those who Devoutly Practise a Life of Stillness* 4, in *Philokalia* 4, p. 335.

[738] Gregory Palamas, *Tr* 1.2.3, in Gendle (1983), p. 42.

come a supple instrument of spiritual advancement.[739] While Gregory agreed with his predecessors that matter is not compatible with the essence of the mind, he proposed that its corruptibility and composite nature can be overcome once it "truly begins to live, having acquired a form of life conformable to the union with Christ."[740]

Gregory's belief in the value of the body is further emphasized by his vigorous defense of the use of somatic techniques during prayer, especially techniques advocated by Gregory of Sinai in accordance with the teachings of the Egyptian desert fathers.[741] A staunch supporter of the Jesus Prayer, Gregory Palamas argued that the adoption of a physical posture conducive to focusing the eyes on the inner place of the heart and to the controlling of the breath was an important means of seeing the light of Divinity.[742]

If Gregory embraced the holistic conception of humankind, he likewise embraced its relational nature. Hence, he advised that the existence of the hesychast be at all times rooted in the here and now. The hesychast works "for the life of the world."[743] Gregory looked to involvement in the church and its network of social relations as a valuable means of deepening divine-human intimacy. If Christians forced themselves "to use the things of this world in

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[739] Gendle (1983), p. 126, n. 48.

[740] Gregory Palamas, *Tr* 1.2.6, in Gendle (1983), p. 45.

[741] The defence of the Jesus Prayer and its somatic techniques took place against the backdrop of Gregory's fierce debate with the Italo-Byzantine monk Barlaam of Calabria. An advocate of God's utter unknowability, Barlaam strongly objected to claims by hesychast monks that it was possible to see divine light during prayer and to experience directly the presense of the transcendent God. Gregory defended the Athonite monastic tradition by insisting on the possibility of real communion with God. While it was indeed the case that God's essence is wholly transcendent and beyond human experience, Gregory proposed that knowledge of God's uncreated energy is attainable. By articulating this doctrine, the Byzantine theologian addressed one of the most fundamental questions of Christian teaching, i.e. how can God be said to be wholly transcendent yet simultaneously intimately linked to the created order? See Gendle (1983), pp. 8-10; McGuckin (2001), pp. 124-130.

[742] McGuckin (2001), p. 125.

[743] Rogich (1995), p. 85, n. 156.

conformity with the commandments of God,"[744] he believed that they were able to turn their backs on evil and to enter a state of impassibility conducive to the engendering of love for the unique Good.[745] The fervent endeavor to do God's will in the world provided humans with the opportunity to effect their inner purification and to offer a living sacrifice. Gregory was ever committed to the early Christian understanding that seekers engage in the quest for God within the context of ordinary, day-to-day existence.

Here we conclude this cursory overview of the early Christian desert tradition and of medieval hesychasm. By looking back to the Egyptian desert and forward to the Byzantine Empire, the attempt has been made to indicate how the intermarriage of Greek and Syrian ascetical doctrines shaped the teaching of both traditions. The desert fathers and the founders of hesychasm alike drew on philosophical constructs as well as biblical heart imagery to describe the ways in which humans might be united with God in an experiential manner. The inquiry into the teaching of both traditions has also shown how prominent of a place Egyptian and Byzantine ascetics accorded to the invocation of the holy name. First implemented in the Egyptian desert, the Jesus Prayer rose to prominence in medieval Byzantium, where it was vigorously defended and where it came to be viewed as the tool *par excellence* of transcending human fragmentation.

[744] Gregory Palamas, *Tr* 2.2.20, in Gendle (1983), p. 55.
[745] Gregory Palamas, *Tr* 2.2.20, in Gendle (1983), p. 55.

CONCLUSION

In the discussion of the prayer of the heart, its origins, its salient features, and its development, we have traveled far. We began with an inquiry into biblical anthropology and came to see that the Hebraic notion of the pure, gentle, and open heart guided the mystical thought of the early church to a decisive degree. Christian theologians knew that direct communion with God depended on the ability to empty the heart of evil and to bring thoughts, feelings, wishes, and actions into accord with the divine will. Like their Jewish ancestors, they looked to the heart as a symbol of personal and cosmic unity. It joined body and soul, the material and immaterial, the created and uncreated. For early Christians, no less than for their predecessors, the heart was at the center of an anthropological teaching that emphasized the holistic nature of human existence.

Next, we saw that the Semitic doctrine of the heart was expanded further in the New Testament. Its authors looked to the heart as the new spiritual temple, the meeting-place between God and humans. They proposed that a heart purified by faith could be transformed into a sacrificial site from which the devout offered their pure selves. Humans who opened themselves to the guidance of Christ and the Spirit were permitted to witness their progressive sanctification and to become vessels of divine glorification.

The inquiry into the concept of the heart in the Old and New Testament allowed us to turn to the discussion of Aphrahat's doctrine of inner prayer with a clearer sense of its source of inspiration. Aphrahat was deeply committed to the scriptural notion of the pure heart and to the rendition of this inner faculty as the supreme symbol of a person's spiritual condition. Like authors of the New Testament, he advocated the inner adoration of God, a feature he brought to the fore by presenting silent prayer as a spiritual offering that is presented from the temple of the heart. The Persian sage envisioned the heart as a liturgical site onto which the fire of

Divinity descended in much the same way in which the Holy Spirit descended onto the elements at the moment of consecration.

Of particular interest in our discussion of Aphrahat was the idea that the Syrian father did not view the interiorization of the temple motif as an invitation to sunder relations with the church and the surrounding world. As we had occasion to witness, Aphrahat was greatly aware of the communal nature of the mystical life. For him, purity of heart, inner prayer, and social philanthropy were intimately connected. The form of prayer most pleasing to God was the act of reaching out to neighbors with compassion and love. We saw that, in many respects, Aphrahat's teaching exemplified the notion that humans come to know God through fellow beings.

If the discussion of Aphrahat brought to the fore the idea that a life of inner prayer is linked to the cultivation of interpersonal relationships and philanthropy, the elucidation of Ephrem's writings provided us with the opportunity to consider in greater detail the role theologians of the early church accorded to the body in the quest for God. We observed that Ephrem viewed embodied existence as essential to the imitation of Christ's many charitable deeds. For him, the body was the means by which the soul made its wishes known and interacted with the world. To the same degree to which the assumption of a human body allowed Divinity to manifest itself to the created order, the soul depended on the body to reveal its loving intentions and to effect greater peace. Ephrem further suggested that the body was the primary means of sensing the presence of the wholly Unknowable. The body's intuitive awareness enabled ascetics to reach beyond the limitations of the intellect and to know God in a deeply felt, experiential manner. Although Ephrem viewed the body as less elevated in nature than the soul and the spirit, he deemed it an essential part of the divine mountain.

The teachings of Aphrahat and Ephrem on charitable conduct and on the body as tools of mystical ascent were closely heeded by their successor Macarius, who emphasized the relational, embodied nature of the ascetical life by employing a heart-centered language. According to Macarius, the notion of the heart suggested an array of interconnected realities. In the heart, the communion between humans became a distinct possibility, as did the communion of body and soul and of the created and uncreated order. The pure heart was ever aware of God's movement to take command of its

deep crevices and provided seekers with a tangible experience of the divine presence. Like Aphrahat and Ephrem, Macarius was deeply committed to the holistic conception of human nature.

In the discussion of Macarius, we also got a first sense of the fact that the two traditions of early Christian mystical thought, the Greek and the Syrian tradition, were not incompatible. Although Macarius' interest in the liturgical rendition of inner prayer and in the use of heart imagery placed his teaching within the Syrian sphere of influence, aspects of Christianity's Greek philosophical background were not lost on the author. Macarius' ability to reconcile elements of both Christian legacies proved of great value to the rise of the prayer of the heart and was refined by subsequent ascetical writers.

The intermarriage of the Hellenic and Semitic teachings was a matter of ongoing discussion in the ensuing consideration of Origen's œuvre. It became apparent that features commonly associated with the Syrian ascetical tradition were present also in the works of Origen and that the theologian was fluent in both expressions of Christian mystical thought.

The biblical concepts of the pure heart and of the heart as a symbol of personal unity were integral to Origen's doctrine. So, too, was the notion of the heart as a spiritual temple. Despite Origen's tendency to draw on abstract Greek philosophical terminology to articulate his ascetical teaching, he infused this teaching with a heart-felt devotion to the personalized Logos. For Origen, the inner discernment of God was never a matter of theoretical speculation. Like the biblically inspired authors of Syrian Christianity, he championed the idea that seekers place themselves, body and soul, in the hands of their personal Savior. Perfection depended on the soul's burning love for its heavenly Bridegroom and on the ardent longing to be introduced to divine life. To convey the all-consuming, passionate nature of the quest for God, Origen drew on the holistic principle of the heart. This principle brought to the fore the fact that lasting peace can be attained only if Deity is known experientially. It also highlighted the fact that Origen, like his Syrian successors, linked the mystical quest to embodied, relational existence.

In discussing the Origenian corpus, we had, on the one hand, occasion to witness its author's debt to the biblical concept of the heart. On the other hand, we were able to establish that Origen's

philosophical learnedness provided him with the means of placing his tender Jesus mysticism within a framework conducive to the detailed exploration of a person's intrapsychic world. Knowledge of Greek philosophy allowed Origen to describe the many facets of human existence with precision. It enabled him to indicate how inner reintegration might facilitate the experiential encounter with God. Origen's intellectual astuteness gave rise to a mystical teaching that had a sound theoretical underpinning and a heart-felt, holistic core.

The examination of Evagrius' ascetical doctrine reintroduced many features previously discussed in the exploration of Origen's work. Attention was drawn to the fact that notions, such as purity of heart (*apatheia*), the heart as the site of the inner liturgical celebration, and the affective encounter with God commonly associated with the Syrian mystical strand were no less integral to the work of Evagrius, a major representative of the Hellenic Christian tradition. While Evagrius, like Origen, was more likely to articulate his teaching by resorting to Greek vocabulary, his mystical doctrine derived from personal experience and reflected the belief that the quest for perfection was closely associated with daily, practical involvement in the trials of human existence. Evagrius never wavered in his commitment to the intuitive perception of God beyond intellectual knowledge.

As was the case in our inquiry into Origenian teaching, the examination of Evagrius' ascetical doctrine thus allowed us to observe that, in the right hands, seemingly disparate elements of early Christian thought could be reconciled with authority and ease. Evagrius' theology was not only systematic and philosophical but also dynamic and biblical. In his attempt to indicate to fellow monastics how they might cultivate an existence conducive to the discernment of archetypal reality and to divine oneness, Evagrius combined intellectual prowess and deep devotion to the person of Christ.

The chapter on the synthesis of the two early Christian mystical strands opened with a discussion of the writings of Dionysius, a theologian who was exceptionally adept at joining earlier teachings into a system of his own. We had the opportunity to note that the sixth century theologian gracefully reconciled elements of Evagrian teaching with aspects of his own Syrian background. Evagrius' views on the passions, on the virtuous life, on *apatheia*, and on un-

distracted, imageless prayer had a distinct place in Dionysian thought, as did the deeply liturgical conception of the mystical life so common to the theology of the early Syrian church.

But Dionysius should not merely be remembered as a skillful synthesizer, for, as we have seen, many of his predecessors had already begun the process of joining the two legacies of Christian teaching. With regard to the shaping of the prayer of the heart, one should remember Dionysius also for further elucidating the Origenian notion of the soul's triadic mystical path, for presenting the return to oneness with God as an experience characterized by unfathomable darkness, and for placing love at the center of the soul's endeavor to attain perfection. For Dionysius, the overflow of God's ecstatic love was the source of all things created. The unifying power of love was also at the heart of his notion of hierarchy.

We noted that rather than envision hierarchy as something constraining and inherently divisive, Dionysius regarded the hierarchical arrangement of the created realm as the primary means of unifying human beings to one another, to the angels, and to God. The hierarchical order allowed for the mediation of divine love, light, and grace. It reintroduced the soul to its inherent order and allowed for its progressive transformation into a divine temple. Dionysius' conviction that hierarchy is synonymous with relatedness guaranteed that neither he nor later theologians who drew on his doctrine would conceive of the quest for divine union in terms of an isolated, self-absorbed endeavor. The pursuit of the mystical life, despite its need for extended periods of silent prayer, would continue to be viewed as a communal experience and as closely linked to fellow beings. The celebration of the interior liturgy was no less relational than the external glorification of God.

Our discussion resumed with the exploration of Maximus, whose keen vision allowed the seventh century theologian to draw on Greek as well as Syrian Christian doctrine to articulate a teaching that exerted a lasting influence on subsequent generations of Christian seekers. By building on Origenian and Evagrian thought, Maximus provided the tradition of the prayer of the heart with a sophisticated anthropological theology. He was able to apply knowledge of a person's internal processes to the lived experience of Christian existence and to show how inner unity might be reestablished. Maximus' mastery of earlier anthropological systems also

enabled him to suggest the means by which interpersonal and cosmic fragmentation might be healed.

In our discussion of the Maximian corpus, we were also able to observe that its author was deeply committed to the heart language so pronounced in the writings of Syrian ascetics, although, as has been pointed out repeatedly, such language was employed also by Origen and Evagrius. Despite his deep involvement in doctrinal matters, Maximus was a theologian who articulated a teaching that radiated warmth and devotion to the Son of God. For him, the incarnation was of the greatest importance and bore witness to the inherent goodness of creation. Maximus' belief in the salvific enfleshment of the Logos propelled him to articulate a mystical teaching that was much invested in corporeality and that looked to the visceral perception of Divinity as the primary means of knowing God.

Maximus' teaching was no less invested in the relational dimension of Christian existence. The theologian was emphatic that the internal celebration of the liturgy and its potential to usher in direct communion with God did not call into question the importance of the church. Like many of his predecessors, Maximus looked to the inner glorification of God as a means of deepening rather than sundering interpersonal relations. The progressive purification and illumination of the heart through undistracted prayer allowed for greater self-knowledge. Greater self-knowledge, in turn, enabled Christians to reconnect with their divine source of being and to experience its all-embracing love. Once they encountered God in the heart, humans were able to love freely and joyfully.

In the hope of providing as complete of a picture of the prayer of the heart as possible, the discussion concluded with a chapter on two aspects of the ancient practice hitherto not considered, the desert tradition and the medieval hesychast tradition. On the one hand, this inquiry allowed us to trace the influence of Greek and Syrian ascetical thought on both legacies. At the same time, it provided the opportunity to pay close attention to one particular expression of the prayer of the heart, the Jesus Prayer, and to consider its origination in the Egyptian desert and its rise to prominence during the later Byzantine era. The emphasis Egyptian and Byzantine mystical theologians placed on the somatic dimension of inner prayer served to highlight further the deep regard

early Christians harbored for the body and its potential to facilitate spiritual advancement.

With the above summary of salient findings in mind, we can now return to our initial discussion of the term "mystical," which was provided in the introduction of this study. Based on McGinn's working definition of mysticism as denoting Christian beliefs and practices that are concerned with "the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God,"[746] we established that early Christians envisioned divine communion as an experience characterized by a deep sense of mystery. We noted that this sense of mystery did not arise from the fact that God and all things divine are kept secret but rather from the fact that the essence of Divinity remains ineffable at heart. While the mystery of God's love for humankind was revealed resoundingly in the Christ event, members of the ancient church believed that it was of such a nature as to surpass anything the human mind could fathom.

This opening proposition has been confirmed throughout the discussion of individual theologians. For instance, we were able to observe that Evagrius characterized the state of pure prayer in which God can be contemplated directly as a state that transcends human constructs and images. Dionysius suggested that God is known in a mysterious darkness of unknowing and championed the concept of apophaticism to convey the incomprehensibility of Deity. All church fathers discussed in this study believed that the infinite nature of Divinity prevented ascetics from ever grasping and describing its essence. For them, the mere proposition that the human mind might penetrate the veil of divine mystery and capture God was inconceivable, for it implied that the latter was finite and subject to limitation.

The early Christian emphasis on a person's inability to grasp God intellectually had lasting implications for the conception of the mystical life and the role assigned therein to the body. The realization that human intellectual powers were limited propelled ascetics to shift their focus of attention away from our rational faculties to

[746] McGinn (1999), p. xvii.

the body and its intuitive awareness to discern God's inner presence. Visceral, participatory knowledge took precedence over theoretical inquiry. Teachers of inner prayer recognized the critical role of sensory experience in any human form of knowledge, including knowledge of the divine.[747] They understood that the wisdom of the body provided them with the means of knowing that God is, even if they could never hope to know what God is.

The body was essential to the mystical life for yet another reason. As has been indicated frequently, early Christians believed that the soul depended on embodiment to express its compassion and goodwill. The immaterial could not shape the phenomenological world and mediate between warring factions unless it had a tangible presence. The body provided such a presence. It allowed humans to reach out to fellow beings and to alleviate their suffering. It provided the means of effecting the rest of God.

We also saw that members of the ancient church looked to the body as the humble yet persistent mentor of the proud soul.[748] Theologians were well aware that the transformation of the human heart into a place of divine indwelling depended on a person's ability to face and master the many challenges posed by embodied existence. They believed that seekers who heeded these vital lessons could work toward their gradual sanctification and catch a glimpse of Paradise even in this lifetime. As Brown suggests, the huge labor and reward of the mystical life happened, because the body could never be abandoned.[749]

The body-centered orientation of early Christian mystical thought has been one focal point of this inquiry. Unlike the commonly held and perhaps clichéd assumption that ascetics strove for communion with God by becoming excessively spiritualized and negating their embodied existence, the writings of the church fathers examined here suggest that this understanding does not accurately reflect their theological outlook. While the spiritualization of material nature was of concern to ascetical practitioners, it was not their goal to deliver the soul from its bodily vessel. Instead, they

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[747] Ashbrook Harvey (2006), p. 171.
[748] Brown (1988), p. 237.
[749] Brown (1988), p. 237.

sought to vouchsafe that body and soul together were subsumed in spirit.[750] Both aspects of human nature were divine creations and, as such, integral to the discernment of God and to a person's deification. Although the soul was deemed superior to the body, the latter was not considered a hindrance to the mystical life but rather an asset. The present study has attempted to highlight some of the reasons underlying this early Christian sentiment.

Throughout this inquiry, close attention has also been given to the communal nature of ascetical existence. We were able to observe that the mysterious, intensely personal encounter with God was placed within a relational setting and hinged on participation in the Body of Christ. Early Christians were convinced that the mystery of God's love could not be experienced apart from the church, its liturgy, and its community. They knew that direct contact with Deity depended on neighborly relations and charitable deeds. Inner prayer and social philanthropy were but two sides of the same coin and to be practiced in conjunction. For theologians of the ancient church, charitable conduct implied the imitation of Christ. It allowed seekers to shape themselves in accordance with their heavenly model and to manifest to the world the divine love that was at the heart of human existence. Communal outreach enabled individuals to discern God-like attributes in their neighbors and to value the sacredness of even the most ordinary and seemingly unimportant of moments.

The idea that inner prayer went hand in hand with active involvement in communal affairs may come as a surprise to modern readers who are wont to conceive of the mystic as a person who, in pursuit of the subjective experience of God, withdraws into isolation. In the present study, the endeavor has been made to rectify this misconception and to show how involvement in mundane human affairs allowed the faithful to manifest, in the here and now, the inclusive and loving nature of the eschatological community. Our ancestors never wavered in their belief that the ability to tran-

[750] Mark Julian Edwards, *Origen Against Plato* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2002), p. 161.

scend human division and to approach all beings in a spirit of equality and love was the hallmark of the sanctified sage.

The notion that communal outreach advances the discernment of God's inner presence introduces us to our final discussion, the discussion of how modern individuals might translate the ancient doctrine of inner prayer into a present day, non-monastic context. As we have seen, theologians of the Byzantine period succeeded masterfully in translating early Christian thought into a medieval context. Does the transposition of this teaching into a twenty-first century setting promise to be equally successful? Can contemporary pilgrims living in the world hope to discern God's presence despite the much altered circumstances of modern day existence?

Given the emphasis of early Christian ascetics on the relational dimension of the mystical life, the practice of inner prayer is in many respects ideally suited to its translation into a present day context. Does not the understanding that love in action is the quintessential means of serving God, indeed, does not the suggestion by theologians, such as Aphrahat, that the reaching out to fellow beings constitutes prayer itself strongly invite such a reconceptualization? Is not the very notion of prayer as an interior liturgy that can be celebrated in any place and at any time of such a nature as to welcome its transposition into a modern, non-monastic context?

To explore this feature, it is helpful to consider the views of several contemporary theologians and to take as our starting-point a revealing passage from the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. In it, reference is made to the advanced spiritual state of a doctor, a layman, who, even while living in the world, participates in the angelic liturgy:

> It was revealed to Abba Antony in the desert: "In the city there is one like you, a doctor by profession, who gives to those in

> need whatever he can spare; and throughout the whole day he sings the Thrice-Holy Hymn with the angels."[751]

The idea expressed in the above lines that the anonymous doctor is spiritually equal to Antony, the greatest of desert fathers and holy men, is thought-provoking. It suggests that what is needed to glorify God and to enter the Heavenly Kingdom is the opportunity to engage in charitable deeds. Ware proposes that the way of *hesychia* "lies open to all: the one thing needful is inner silence, not outer."[752] We might expound on this important notion by suggesting that what is needful to the way of *hesychia* is not only inner silence but commitment to the purification of the heart through philanthropic relief. While Christians living in the world are, no doubt, at a disadvantage in the attempt to enter a state of deep inner stillness (the world cannot but be a distracting place), their involvement in worldly affairs, on the other hand, provides them with constant opportunities to discern God through the cultivation of ethical conduct. For contemporary Christians, active service may well be the foremost means of deepening their religious existence and of drawing close to God. By committing to love in action, they overcome isolation and increase the well-being of fellow beings. They give rest to God and are propelled into the company of the angels. Individuals who view the welfare and progress of their neighbors with as much joy as their own and who perceive reality with intrinsic mutuality are most authentic in their imitation of Christ.[753]

In the third century, Origen wrote that "he prays 'constantly' (deeds of virtue or fulfilling the commandments are included as part of prayer) who unites prayer with the deeds required and right deeds with prayer."[754] According to Origen, the faithful worship

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[751] *Antony* 24, in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1984), p. 6.

[752] Ware (2000), p. 86.

[753] Mark A. McIntosh*, Discernment and Truth: The Spirituality and Theology of Knowledge* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004), p. 113.

[754] Origen, *PEuch* 12.2, in Greer (1979), p. 104.

God if what they do and say is for the glory of God.[755] Hence, all Christians who act in the service of Divinity and seek to transcend earthly divisions engage in prayer. While silent meditation on God is ever an essential feature of a prayerful existence, such an existence rests on communal outreach and on the wish to reconcile humans to one another and to God. Christians living in the world can, in the words of Paul Evdokimov, "introduce into society and relationships the truth of the dogmas they live, thus dislodging the evil and profane elements of the world."[756] Non-monastic Christians have the ability to counteract the tendency toward divisiveness, isolation, and self-interest which is so intrinsic to our times by extending the celebration of the interior liturgy into culture and society.[757] The more seekers work toward unity and peace, the purer their hearts become and the brighter the divine light that shines within them.

The ability to enter stillness so as to perceive God's presence is a vital aspect of inner prayer, and, as has been suggested, for Christians who lack the ordered framework of a religious community, the opportunity to experience a state of altered consciousness in which Divinity can be discerned is limited. Yet if this study has accomplished what it set out to do, it has indicated that reliance on the transformative impact of interpersonal relations is, in itself, a powerful tool of spiritual advancement. As Clément posits, the whole existence of a person can become prayer if it is interpreted in the light of the cross and the resurrection.[758]

Time and again, we have had the opportunity to confirm this maxim. We have seen that the true follower of Christ is the person who, guided by God's will and an earnest desire to imitate the Logos incarnate, relates ever more fully to fellow beings and to the created order. Genuine mystics seek to overcome imposed barriers and, by doing so, to introduce to daily existence the peace, justice,

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[755] Origen, *Homilies on the Visions of Isaiah* 4.1, cited in Clément (1982), p. 212.

[756] Evdokimov (1998), p. 238.

[757] The idea of offering the Eucharist in all things, as Paul required, is addressed by Clément (1993), p. 212.

[758] Clément (1993), p. 212.

and equality that characterize the angelic community. Like Underhill, they believe that the distinction between the mystical life and the practical life is false and that it is through "all the circumstances of existence, inward and outward, not only those we like to label spiritual, that we are pressed to our right position and given our supernatural food. For a spiritual life is simply a life in which all that we do comes from the center, where we are anchored in God."[759]

The doctrine of the prayer of the heart is based on the premise that there is no division between doctrinal and mystical theology and that the teaching of the church guides Christians toward the experimental encounter with God. Ascetics of the ancient church knew first-hand that intimate, felt contact with Divinity could not be brought about through intellectual inquiry. For them, the somatic perception of God was the only means of tasting the joys of the heavenly realm and of finding lasting peace.

Throughout this study, the idea that the quest for God hinges on the holistic conception of human nature and that it cannot be conducted without paying close attention to the body has been emphasized. This approach was adopted in the hope of addressing the desire of modern seekers to honor the psychosomatic dimension of their existence and to accord the body a prominent place in the spiritual journey. The attempt has been made to present Christians who can no longer subscribe to the Cartesian fragmentation of reality, including the fragmentation of body and soul, with a doctrine that acknowledges the interrelatedness of all things and the inherent unity of mind and matter. Such Christians may find comfort in an ancient practice that advocates an integrative view of human nature and that deems the body crucial to personal, interpersonal, and cosmic reintegration. The idea that the divine quest is closely linked to our embodied nature promises to speak to all mystical pilgrims who believe that somatic awareness reveals to us a presence too profound and vast to be captured by the finite human mind. The notion that intimacy with God is dependent on em-

[759] Keith Beasley-Topliffe, ed., *The Soul's Delight: Selected Writings of Evelyn Underhill* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 1998), p. 11.

bodiment also promises to be of interest to all modern individuals who, like members of the early church, believe that the body is the terrain on which the battle to expand human consciousness is waged and won. Early Christians were deeply aware of the fact that spiritual growth called for the broadening of existing boundaries—an inherently painful process—and that this process was made possible by the body. This timeless observation has lost none of its pertinence and is as valuable today as it was in late antiquity.

Here, then, we conclude this study. No doubt, there is a great deal more to explore. Each theologian considered in these pages deserves further, detailed attention on his contributions to the tradition of the prayer of the heart. Such a venture would allow for the ongoing exploration of the incarnational spirit of ancient mystical thought and its pro-body, pro-community orientation. In this study, we have but touched the tip of the iceberg. Hopefully though, the unifying message of Christianity's mystical legacy has become apparent. Hopefully, it has been shown that early Christians searched for God not by negating physical, relational existence but by engaging more fully in it, thereby hoping to praise God to the best of their ability.

The unifying nature of the Christian mystical tradition has been at the forefront of this inquiry in yet another respect. Wherever appropriate, it has been shown that the division of this tradition into distinct schools of thought, the Greek and the Syrian school of thought, is but an invention of our own time and does not capture the fluid nature of Christianity's ancient heritage. Theologians of the early church did display certain tendencies in the choice of language and articulated their teaching by veering either toward the Hellenic or the Semitic pole of Christian mystical thought. However, the Alexandrian notion of the *nous'* ascent into the luminous presence of Divinity and the Syrian understanding of the descent into the depths of the heart did not describe two distinct approaches to the ascetical life. Advocates of both teachings sought to reflect on the same divine reality. The means by which they proposed to touch upon this reality were inherently compatible. In this respect, Greek and Syrian mystical teachings constitute aspects of one unified, dynamic whole.

Last but not least, attention has also been given to the relevance of Christianity's ancient teaching within the modern world.

Again guided by the motif of unity, it has been proposed how contemporary individuals might benefit from the ascetical doctrine of early Christians, and how this doctrine might allow them to reconcile a life of inwardness with the responsibilities of everyday, worldly existence. This endeavor to unify the past and the present has hopefully indicated the lasting value of the doctrine of the prayer of the heart to modern pilgrims. A teaching which promises to reveal to us how the doors to a heart-felt encounter with God might be opened and inner peace rediscovered is a wonderful gift bestowed upon today's world by theologians of the early church.

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